



Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College

ISSN: 3107-5568

CONFLUENCE

Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences & Commerce

Vol. 2, Issue 1
June 2026



Peer-Reviewed,
Multidisciplinary
International
Journal

Editor-in-chief:

Dr. Pragyan Mohanty

ISSN: 3107-5568

CONFLUENCE

Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences & Commerce



A Peer-Reviewed, Multidisciplinary International Journal

Vol. 2, Issue 1

June 2026

Editor-in-chief:

Dr. Pragyan Mohanty



Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College,

Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Confluence: Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences & Commerce

ISSN: 3107-5568 (online)

Vol. 2, Issue 1, June 2026.

A peer-reviewed, open-access, multidisciplinary International journal
published biannually – in June and December.

Published by:

Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College (Affiliated to Calcutta University)
8/9, Bankim Chatterjee Street,
College Square, Kolkata-700073
West Bengal, India.

Email:

confluence.ssjgc@gmail.com (Journal)

ssjalancollege@gmail.com (Institution)

M: +916289835475

Website Address: www.ssjalangirlscollege.org.in

Journal Home Page: www.ssjalangirlscollege.org.in/journal.php

© Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College, Kolkata.

All rights pertaining to individual articles are retained by their respective authors.

Any form of reproduction must be preceded by formal intimation to the
Editor-in-Chief, as well as the concerned author(s). Appropriate
citation of the original publication in *CJHSSC* is obligatory.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0
International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Corresponding Editor: Dr. Pragyan Mohanty,
Principal, Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College,
8/9, Bankim Chatterjee Street, College Square,
Kolkata-700073, West Bengal, India.
Email: pragyan70@gmail.com

Page Setting and Cover Design: Bhaskar Kumar Das

Front Cover Image: Bay of Bengal, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

Image courtesy: Bhaskar Kumar Das

Disclaimer:

The views and opinions expressed in the articles included in this volume are solely those of the respective authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the editors. Each author is responsible for the ideas, critiques, and factual content presented in their work. Contributors are also accountable for complying with international ethical standards for publication, including adherence to copyright and intellectual property regulations. While the editors have tried their best to carefully review, format, and make necessary corrections to the manuscripts, if there are still any inadvertent lapses, the onus lies solely with the respective authors of the articles.

Board of Editors:

Editor-in-Chief:

Dr. Pragyan Mohanty

Managing Editors:

Dr. Debarati Sen & Dr. Bhaskar Kumar Das

Associate Editors:

Dr. Madhurima Dasgupta, Dr. Basupurna Mukherjee, Mausumi Choudhuri, CMA Dr. Raghavendra Ray, Dr. Anupriya Basu, Dr. Maitryee Guha, Dr. Yang Lhamu Bhutia, Dr. Arunava Mondal, Niranjana Adhikari, Dr. Pritam Chakraborty

[Members of the Editorial Board/ Peers](#) ([click to view](#))

Board of Advisors:

- Asis Kumar Ghosh, PhD, WBES, Joint D.P.I., Education Directorate, Department of Higher Education, Government of West Bengal, and Administrator, Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College, Kolkata, West Bengal, India.
- Prof. Mita Banerjee, PhD, Vice Chancellor, Diamond Harbour Women's University, West Bengal, India. Former Vice Chancellor, WBUTTEPA; Former Vice Chancellor, Kanyashree University and Murshidabad University (Additional Charge); Former Emeritus Professor and Chief Academic Advisor, Swami Vivekananda University, Barrackpore, Kolkata, India.
- Prof. Goutam Ghosal, PhD, D.Litt., Former Professor & Head, Department of English, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, West Bengal, India; & Governing Board Member, Auroville Foundation (Under Ministry of Education, Government of India), India.
- Prof. Bill Ashcroft, PhD, Professor Emeritus, School of the Arts and Media, University of New South Wales, Sydney 2052, Australia.
- Prof. Nandini Sahu, PhD, Vice Chancellor, Hindi University, Howrah, West Bengal, India.
- Prof. Sridipa Sinha, PhD, Professor, Department of Education, University of Calcutta, Alipore Campus, Kolkata-700027. West Bengal, India.
- Prof. Sumana Das Sur, PhD, Professor, Department of Bengali, Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India.
- Prof. Sanjib Kumar Roy, PhD, Professor & Head, Department of Education, Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University, Cooch Behar, West Bengal, India.

CONTENTS

Editorial Introduction	i
Notes on Contributors	ii
Section – I	
1. Conditional Belonging and Selective Visibility: Exploring Racial Politics and Diasporic Subjectivity in Jhumpa Lahiri's <i>The Lowland</i> and Kiran Desai's <i>The Inheritance of Loss</i>	1-13
<i>Amar Debnath & Dr. Aditya Ghosh</i>	
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20603268	
2. Between Ritual and Refusal: Reimagining Gendered Scripts in South Asian Film	14-25
<i>Afsana Afsar Tuly</i>	
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20644486	
3. You Are Not Good Enough: Gendered Discourses of Inadequacy and the Construction of Female Subjectivity	26-34
<i>Dr. Rakhi Param Sawlani</i>	
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20646029	
4. 'Pinjar' - The Caged Skeleton: Shame, Silence, and Survival	35-43
<i>Debanjana Banerjee</i>	
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20648011	
Section – II	
5. Coherence amid Contrasts and Contradictions in Nature: Busting the Anthropocentric View of Ecology in English Poetry	44-61
<i>Kanak Kanti Bera</i>	
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20667971	
6. De-Romanticizing Wordsworth's Effigy of 'Nature' and 'Femininity' in <i>Tintern Abbey</i> and <i>the Lucy Poems</i> : An Eco-Feminist Perspective	62-72
<i>Shruti Dugar</i>	
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20679832	
7. From Man's World to Gaia's: An Ecocritical Reading of Mary Shelley's <i>The Last Man</i> (1826)	73-86
<i>Dipyan Banerjee</i>	
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20680115	
Section – III	
8. Four Discourses, Four Subjects: Tracing Subjectivity and Desire in Tagore's <i>Chaturanga</i>	87-98
<i>Tiyas Mondal</i>	
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20680248	

9. **Modernism as a Shared Emotional Structure Across Cultures: Convergences between W.H. Auden and Buddhadeva Bose** 99 - 108

Sagnik Chakraborty

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20682287>

Section – IV

10. **Science, Myth and History: Tracing the Hindu Nationalist Discourse on Aryan Invasion Theory and its Discursive Shift with the Re-discovery of Saraswati** 109 - 123

Akanksha Kesar & Balaji Ranganathan

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20705956>

11. **Ahimsa and Beyond: Animal Ethics in Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu Thought** 124 - 142

Prabhu Preetam Roul, Dr. Dipanshu Sharma & Ishita Mishra

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20707269>

12. **FDI in E-Commerce in India: A Policy Perspective** 143 - 157

Dr. Paromita Chakraborty

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20719367>

13. **Yalang and Palam: Cultural Heritage, Identity and Performance in the Limbu Community of Eastern Nepal** 158 - 168

Dharmendra Tamang

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20720639>

14. **Right to Information Act and its Implementation in Health Sciences: A Thematic Review** 169 - 176

Kubeli Dutta

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20722080>

15. **The Concept of Dalit Consciousness** 177 - 187

Dr. Suchita Kujur

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20722543>

Confluence: Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences & Commerce is currently indexed by:



TOGETHER WE REACH THE GOAL



Editorial Introduction

It gives us immense pleasure to present the latest issue of *Confluence: Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences & Commerce* (ISSN: 3107-5568), a peer-reviewed, multidisciplinary International journal published by Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College (affiliated to the University of Calcutta), Kolkata, West Bengal, India. The present issue (Vol. 2, Issue 1) brings together a rich and diverse collection of articles that reflect contemporary concerns in literature, culture, gender studies, environmental humanities, philosophy, economics, history, and social thought.

The volume is organized into four thematic sections. **Section I** explores the question of identity formation, societal expectations, and the resilience of the marginalized, with essays that interrogate racial politics and diasporic subjectivity, the subversive potential of South Asian cinema, the psychological and structural discourses of inadequacy that subtly shape female subjectivity, and the traumatic matrix of shame, silence, and survival that defines the gendered experience of historical crisis. **Section II** shifts focus toward the Environmental Humanities, challenging long-standing human-centric paradigms and reassessing our relationship with the non-human world. **Section III** focuses on the fluid movements of desire, subjectivity, and modernism across regional and cultural borders. **Section IV** addresses traditional knowledge systems, cultural practices, and contemporary social policies.

We extend our sincere gratitude to all contributors for their rigorous scholarship, to our reviewers for their meticulous evaluations, and to the members of the Editorial and Advisory Boards for their continued guidance and support. We also acknowledge the unwavering encouragement of the administration of Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College in nurturing this academic venture.

We hope this issue of *Confluence* will encourage meaningful academic dialogue across disciplines and inspire further research among scholars, students, and readers alike.

Dr. Pragyan Mohanty

Editor-in-chief

Kolkata.
June 15, 2026

Confluence: Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences & Commerce
ISSN: 3107-5568(online)

Notes on Contributors

1. **Amar Debnath** is presently pursuing Ph.D. in the Faculty of Liberal Arts at ICFAI University, Tripura, India.
2. **Dr. Aditya Ghosh** is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Liberal Arts, ICFAI University, Tripura, India. His areas of interest are Populism, Post-Truth, Media and Marketing Studies, Indian writing in English, Diaspora Studies, and Digital Humanities.
3. **Afsana Afsar Tuly** is a doctoral student in English at the University of Texas at Arlington, USA. Her work focuses on literacy development, community storytelling, and educational equity, particularly in relation to women and children from marginalized communities. She has been involved in community-based initiatives in the United States that support families through educational and outreach programs.
4. **Dr. Rakhi Param Sawlani** is an independent researcher. She has served as a faculty member in Education and a research assistant for academic projects. She has authored two books and over 50 peer-reviewed publications, including book chapters, over the past 20 years. She also serves as an editor and reviewer for journals in Science, Psychology, Education, and Economics.
5. **Debanjana Banerjee** is an academic, specializing in literature. Educated at Kendriya Vidyalaya, Fort William, and the University of Calcutta, she worked at *The Statesman*. She is currently serving as a Guest Lecturer at the Department of English, Narasinha Dutt College, Howrah, West Bengal, India.
6. **Dr. Kanak Kanti Bera** is presently serving as an Associate Professor of English at Panskura Banamali College (autonomous), Panskura, West Bengal, and a guest faculty member at the Department of Linguistics, University of Calcutta, West Bengal, India. Holding Master's degrees in English literature, ELT, and Linguistics, Dr. Bera has a keen interest in literature-linguistic interfaces, which is his primary area of research. His M.Phil. (Linguistics & Phonetics) is from EFL University, Hyderabad, and PGDCE from the University of Hyderabad. His Ph.D. from IIT Guwahati was an empirical investigation of vowel acoustics and its phonological implications. His research interests also include English literature, language, ELT, and communication.
7. **Shruti Dugar** is currently an independent researcher. She is keenly interested in Environmental Criticism, Post-colonial studies, and Memory Studies, among others.
8. **Dipyaman Bhowmick** is a postgraduate student in the Department of English at Jadavpur University, West Bengal, India. His research and publications address the works of Toru Dutt, Ann Radcliffe, and Mary Shelley, among others.

9. **Tiyas Mondal** is an independent researcher. His primary research interests include Lacanian psychoanalysis, Modernism, and Marxism, among others. He is currently focused on exploring the intersections of psychoanalytic theory and subjectivity within early twentieth-century Bengali literature.
10. **Sagnik Chakraborty** is a Guest Faculty member in the Department of English (UG and PG) at Narasinha Dutt College, Howrah, West Bengal, India. He did his Master's degree in English from the University of Calcutta. His research interests include modernist sensibilities and comparative literatures, among others.
11. **Akanksha Kesar** is a Junior Research Fellow at the Department of Comparative Literature & Translation Studies, Central University of Gujarat, specializing in the evolution of Hindu nationalist ideology, with a particular focus on works by Hindu nationalist ideologues. She has completed her Master's in English from the University of Delhi, India.
12. **Balaji Ranganathan** is Professor & HoD, Department of Comparative Literature & Translation Studies, and Dean, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, at the Central University of Gujarat, India.
13. **Prabhu Preetam Roul** is currently pursuing a four-year integrated Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Education (B.A.B.Ed.) at the Regional Institute of Education, NCERT, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India. His research and professional interests are situated at the intersection of British Literature, Linguistics, Pedagogical Innovation, and the Integration of Literature and Media.
14. **Dr. Dipanshu Sharma** is an Assistant Professor in Social Science Education at the Regional Institute of Education, NCERT, Bhubaneswar, India. His academic focus encompasses History, Philosophy, Indian Knowledge Systems, and ICT in Education. Dr. Sharma holds a diverse academic portfolio, including an M.A. in History, an M.A. in Philosophy, an M.Ed., a Ph.D. in Education, and a Certificate Course in French.
15. **Ishita Mishra** is currently pursuing her Master of Education (M.Ed.) at the Regional Institute of Education, NCERT, Bhubaneswar. She holds an integrated B.A.B. Ed degree from the same institute and a Master's degree in History from the P.G. Department of History, Utkal University, Vani Vihar, and Bhubaneswar. Her research interests lie at the intersection of Social Science Education, Pedagogical Innovation, ICT Integration, Modern Indian History, and Policy Planning in Education.
16. **Dr. Paromita Chakraborty** is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Surendranath College, Kolkata, West Bengal, India. She completed her M.A., M.Phil., and PhD from the Centre of Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New

Delhi. Her areas of research include agrarian politics, political economy, public policy, and foreign trade.

17. **Dharmendra Tamang** is currently serving as an English Lecturer at East-Pole College in Jorpati, Kathmandu, Nepal.

18. **Kuheli Dutta** is presently serving as an Assistant Librarian at the Presidency University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India. Currently, she is pursuing a Ph.D. in Library and Information Science at Netaji Subhas Open University, Kolkata, India. Her areas of interest include Resource Sharing among Libraries, Community Information Systems and Services, Library Automation, Academic Integrity, Digitization, and the Application of IT in library services, among others.



Conditional Belonging and Selective Visibility: Exploring Racial Politics and Diasporic Subjectivity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

Amar Debnath

Research Scholar

Faculty of Liberal Arts

ICFAI University, Tripura.

Dr. Aditya Ghosh

Assistant Professor

Faculty of Liberal Arts

ICFAI University, Tripura.

Abstract

This article examines the “model minority” stereotype attributed to the Indian Diaspora in the United States that celebrates the remarkable professional achievements and socioeconomic contributions of the community. The article argues that the “model minority” discourse is sustained by the dominant white Euro-American structures of power mechanisms to selectively legitimize certain classes of a diaspora while marginalizing others within the same community. Through a close textual analysis of *The Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri and *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai, this article highlights the selective visibility of the flourishing Indian Diaspora as skilled capital, yet subtly withholds a fuller integration of both privileged and precarious Indian migrants. The study is informed by the frameworks of Foucauldian discourse, diaspora studies, and Critical Race Theory in analyzing the experiences of the heterogeneous Indian diaspora community, who are discriminated against on the basis of race and culture.

Corresponding Author: inquisitivescholar23@gmail.com



Received: 29.04.2026

Accepted: 01.06.2026

Published: 15.06.2026

CJHSSC, Volume: 2

Issue: 1, June 2026

Page: 1 - 13

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20603268>

Copyright: Author © 2026



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Published by: Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College,
Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Available at: www.ssjalangirlscollege.org.in/journal.php

Email: confluence.ssjgc@gmail.com

Keywords: Indian-American Diaspora, Model Minority, conditional belonging, diasporic subjectivity, racial governance.

Introduction

The term “model minority” was popularized in the U.S. public discourse during the 1960s as positive stereotyping for the economic success of the Asian communities (Saran, 2016, p. 9). The Asians are praised for their high educational achievements and law-abiding nature. Initially, the term was applied to Japanese-Americans who were once considered as “Yellow Perils.” The label has engulfed the Asian Indians, particularly after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, when plenty of skilled Indians started to migrate and subsequently prosper in the American economy. But the critics excavate the hidden layers of the model minority myth and bust it as a pure racial discourse, as Saran (2016) describes it as the hegemonic racial power of whites in America to counter the racial implications of the civil rights movement during the 1960s. The model minority discourse normalizes the success of Asian-Americans achieved through hard work and cultural discipline without begging for government welfare (Saran, 2016). It constructs Indians as a “successful” minority community, but not included in the “majority” frameworks of the white Americans. Further, critics find that the generalization of Asians/Indians as successful obscures the internal heterogeneity of the Asian communities, which ultimately restricts any financial aid to the needy (p. 10). The stereotype posits that the working-class migrants, undocumented individuals, and low-paid service workers are beyond focus.

Diasporic Subjectivity

Diaspora refers to populations “dispersed” from an original homeland who maintain material, cultural, or emotional ties to it (Cohen, 1996; Safran, 1991; Tölölyan, 2018). They often experience a sense of partial belonging in host societies due to their homeland connections. Thus, the diasporic individuals destabilize the idea of a single nation-state as they bear traces of culture from their original homeland, but subsequently adopt the cultural values and norms of the host society. The issue of citizenship becomes problematized for the “de-territorialized” community. However, legal inclusion in the host nation therefore coexists with “racialized otherness”, where the immigrants face marginalization for their ambivalent ideological commitment (Owen, 2005). The diasporic subjects retain a vague sense of original home, culture, and belonging and encounter diasporic ambivalence at the question of cultural identity (Bhabha, 1994; Davis, 2006). Scholars of diaspora studies refer to diasporic subjectivity as the formation of identity under conditions of spatial “dispersal” along with corresponding issues of cultural alienation and transnational affiliations (Pandurang, 2017). Demir (2022) reports that many

diaspora theorists and scholars propose understanding the diaspora conditions through the study of “subjectivity”, rather than focusing on Diaspora as a formation (p.19). The critic also argues that conceptualization such as ‘hybridity’ originated from the cultural identity of the diaspora community, but it has invariably focused on diasporic subjectivity (p.23). Anand (2009) proposes that analyzing individual experience within the collective Diaspora would call for a hyper-aware diasporic experience rather than pondering on a collective sense of unhappiness (p. 104). However, many scholars refute the proposal of looking at Diaspora as a subjective experience that neglects the political agenda of the “exemplary community.” Therefore, in this paper, diasporic subjectivity is conceptualized as not merely individual consciousness of cultural and spatial disorientation of living away from a homeland, but it subsumes historically and politically charged factors of migration along with individual negotiation of social, economic, and political parameters of both home and host countries.

Review of Related Literature

The scholarship on Indian Diaspora engages with critical explorations on migration and settlement with different phases and patterns of migration (Jayaram, 2009: p. 392). The scholars of the Indian diaspora study issues such as identity formation, cultural negotiations in a foreign hostland (p. 412). Jhumpa Lahiri’s literary works highlight the discomfort of the hyphenated identity of the Indian Diaspora, especially the American-born (Mishra, 2007). Pius (2014) finds Lahiri’s *The Lowland* as a tale of personal misery where the characters face “isolation” and stay away from the “politics” of the nation. However, Khadka (2021) and Kumar (2026) trace out the elements of identity crisis in the narrative by critically looking into migration and identity construction. Neha (2025) explores the “nation” as a recurrent theme in Lahiri’s *The Lowland*, delineating how migration across borders transforms the “national” connection. Eldiasty (2022) decodes the spatial-temporal perspective in the novel, highlighting the nostalgia and traumatic experiences connected to the geographic locations.

Raina (2018) finds that both Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai, as Indian-American authors, harp on the “duality” of diaspora discourse of home and hostland, overtly meditating on the cultural identity. Many scholars explore the Postcolonial dilemmas, identity issues, human violence, and marginalization in Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* (Abraham, 2017; Alkhodairy, 2024; Ferguson, 2009; Golla, 2016; Gnanasekaran, 2008; Kour, 2016). However, Sabo (2012) finds Desai departing from the Diaspora or transnational theorization, who, as an author, focuses on socioeconomic inequalities under global capitalism. In the same line, Dash (2014) finds that

Desai is preoccupied with the multicultural and multinational experiences of the characters under the influence of globalization. Critics also uncover that Desai's work *The Inheritance of Loss* carries less potential to be called a postcolonial or diasporic narrative as it contains more than the issue of cultural identity, rather exposing the unequal capital flow (Jackson, 2016).

The scholarly studies on the “model minority” stereotype frequently focus on socioeconomic success and professional mobility of South Asian Americans, including Indian-Americans. However, very little attention has been paid to the internal stratifications within these communities. There lies a significant gap in understanding diaspora subjectivity employing the model minority discourse in the experiences of the internally stratified Indian Diaspora in the US. The objective of this study is to involve “model minority” discourse as a racial politics in constructing conditional belonging and selective visibility among the Indian Diaspora in the United States through the literary representations of diasporic subjectivity. This article advances existing scholarship on the Indian Diaspora by bringing Foucauldian discourse theory and Critical Race Theory to demonstrate that the “model minority” is not a simple and positive stereotype, but it is a disciplinary racial mechanism that legitimizes economically productive migrants and renders the precarious migrants as socially excluded.

Methodology

The literary representations of Indian migrants in *The Lowland* (2013) by Jhumpa Lahiri and *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) by Kiran Desai are taken as cases to analyze the mechanism of racial governance and conditional belonging of both privileged and precarious Indian migrants in the United States. Lahiri's novel represents an educated and professional Indian migrant negotiating assimilation within the United States. On the other hand, Desai's novel delineates the experiences of a precarious migrant worker and racial marginalization. These two novels offer contrasting but complementary representations of privileged and vulnerable Indian diasporic subjectivities, enabling a comprehensive exploration of the “model minority” discourse that selectively recognizes certain migrant bodies while excluding others. The study employs qualitative close textual analysis of the primary materials, focusing on the representations of living conditions, racial encounters, and their perception of assimilation and exclusion in the American social structure. The details are extracted from the dialogues and narrative descriptions tracing the moments of racial discrimination underpinning selective visibility and conditional belonging.

This paper draws upon three interrelated theoretical frameworks in analyzing diaspora experiences. First, the diaspora theory provides the conceptual basis for understanding migration and negotiation of cultural identity in the hostland. The scholarly insights of Hall (1990) and Bhabha (1994) inform the study by conceptualizing fluid diasporic identities, hybridity, and ambivalence of belonging. Second, the Foucauldian conceptualization of discourse is used to show that power produces and sustains it to regulate social structures. Discourse as a system of knowledge produces and normalizes social reality, which in turn legitimizes power relations (Foucault, 1980, p. 93). Third, the frameworks of Critical Race Theory (CRT) inform this inquiry by foregrounding race as a structural attribute to humankind. Thinkers such as Derrick Bell and Kimberlé Crenshaw evaluate “race” as structurally embedded in institutional and everyday practices. CRT argues that racial discrimination is an ordinary practice that privileges whites over people of colour, and the racial categorization is socially produced and sustained through institutional arrangements (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023, p. 9). Both Foucauldian discourse theory and Critical Race Theory are employed to examine the production and institutional perpetuation of racial power. Foucauldian discourse theory enables the study to analyze the “model minority” narrative as a regime of knowledge that normalizes the selective inclusion of productive and docile migrant subjectivities. Critical Race Theory complements this framework by exposing institutional structures that privilege white Euro-Americans and marginalize other races. These frameworks inform the article in interpreting the “model minority” stereotype as a discursive construct and racial governance strategy that dictates the conditional belonging of Indian migrants.

“Model Minority” Discourse and Minority Experience

Critiques of the “model minority” have consistently underscored its racialized strategy to mask the structural inequalities since it emerged during the mid-1960s, alongside the Civil Rights Movement in America. The narrative was strategically deployed to contrast Asian-American “success” with the struggles of African-American communities to obscure the systemic racism and stereotyping of minority groups in the US. From a Foucauldian perspective, this operates as a “disciplinary” discourse by the white Euro-American “majority” to produce the “docile” minority subjects (Foucault, 1995). Thus, the “model minority” is not about reflecting the “truth” but is used as a power mechanism of racial politics. Critics also argue that the “model minority” homogenizes diverse communities and erases intra-diasporic inequalities, privileging a narrow, class-specific narrative of achievement (Lee, 2009). The literary representations of the

experiences of Subhash in Lahiri's *The Lowland* and Biju in Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* offer a testimony to diametrically varied diasporic experiences of the Indian community. Subhash appears to embody the idealized "model minority" who is an educated migrant who achieves professional stability, which helped him to integrate into American society with minimal disruption. Subhash easily mingled with Richard, the fellow American student at the university. They shared meals; even Subhash learned to drive with Richard's car. Later, Subhash befriended Holly, a separated American lady, to build an intimate relationship. However, the relationship did not last long, as Holly reconciled with her husband. In his later phase of life, Subhash married Elise, an American school teacher. All these life events hint towards an apparent integration of Subhash with the American people.

In stark contrast, Biju's narrative in *The Inheritance of Loss* exposes the exclusionary part that the "model minority" discourse systematically obscures. As an undocumented worker, Biju navigates the exploitative labour conditions and ultimately occupies a space of invisibility in the context of the "Model Minority" success story of Indian immigrants. Biju overstayed his tourist visa and started to work in New York restaurants as an illegal migrant. Before the routine check of documents of the restaurant workers, Frank, the Manager, did not assist him; instead, he politely stated: "Just disappear quietly is my advice..." (Desai, 2006, p.16). The wife of an Italian restaurant owner deterred him only because "he smells" for his use of scented hair oil (p. 48). Hoping for a green card through a marital relationship, he approaches random American girls, but "they barely looked at him" (p. 123). Thus, his experiences testify to the material realities of unskilled migrants who are ignored, in spite of the positive stereotyping of the Indian Diaspora who gain success with sheer hard work and cultural discipline. Subhash's conditional inclusion and Biju's outright exclusion both act as myth-busters, exposing the discursive regime of "Model Minority" that selectively recognizes certain subjects while excluding others from the same community.

Racial Categorization and Diasporic Subjectivity

Critics interpret the "model minority" discourse as a "racial project" of categorizing the Asian and the African minority population that co-exist with dominant whites (Saran, 2016). The hype aligns with "interest convergence" of the whites that allows limited minority success that does not threaten power structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023, p. 9). CRT frameworks also insist that racism and power are inseparable, as both are embedded in the systemic structures. In the context of the Indian-American Diaspora, minority inclusion is permitted only when it aligns

with dominant interests (Bell, 1980). Thus, skilled migrants may be welcomed for their offering of in-demand labour and technical expertise, yet they continue to be marked as “other.” Similarly, the unskilled and the economically precarious migrants remain “unwelcome” due to their non-productive manual services and, of course, for racial/cultural differences.

In *The Lowland*, Subhash’s racial identity continues to mark him as “other” within the American social structure. His Indian upbringing is a matter of curiosity for the white American associates. Richard, the fellow university student, asked about the Indian way of life amid the evils of poverty and caste oppression. Holly, the “unexpected” American girlfriend of Subhash, wants to know about his origin due to his visible “other” racial features. Lahiri narrates the curiosity of Holly about Subhash:

She never tired of asking him about his upbringing. The most ordinary details of his life, which would have made no impression on a girl from Calcutta, were what made him distinctive to her. (Lahiri, 2013, p. 90)

She further asked if he liked his stay in “pretty different” America. Subhash acknowledges the gulf of differences between the two separate lands. He became more aware of his racial and cultural “otherness” as he advances in his relationship with Holly. He was amazed by the individual freedom Holly enjoys as an American. In India, it could have been impossible to lead a smoother life than Holly did in America.

Both Richard and Holly get connected to Subhash for his privileged status as a university student with a scholarship, but both acknowledge one fact that Subhash’s stay in America is short-lived. As soon as his studies are over, he is expected to depart for his own home. Their conceptions reveal a persistence of racial hierarchy and temporary belonging of the immigrants. Apparently, both the American “friends” accept him in different contexts, yet both of them reduce his existence to a racial entity. Subhash’s success as a skilled professional conforms to the normative expectations of the dominant whites that put him in the category of “needed.” However, this utilitarian approach does not seamlessly translate into full cultural or social belonging. Holly ultimately rejects Subhash as a life partner when her husband, Keith, returns to her. Richard shows his utter surprise when he accidentally meets Subhash, still living in America. Subhash’s experience exemplifies how race continues to structure diasporic life even in the absence of explicit discrimination. As a graduate student and later as a lab researcher, Subhash is institutionally accommodated. However, the institutional inclusion remains limited to his

functional roles, as he is unable to integrate into American life beyond his professional settings socially. Although in the later phase of his life, Elise gives him companionship, it was possible only when she was left alone by American kith and kin.

Race is conceptualized as a socially constructed phenomenon embedded in institutional systems by the dominant whites (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). The white-centric racism becomes particularly evident in Biju's diasporic life as an undocumented migrant in the United States. His experiences are not incidental misfortunes but outcomes of a systemic racial discrimination that exploits the precarious minority. Biju heard about the better life conditions of the Indians in America, which motivated him to pay for his official migration to the land of equal opportunity. But soon, he realized the void of the big American dream. He has to accept the exploitative low-wage work in the backrooms of restaurants. The unhealthy conditions and racial discrimination meted out to Biju reveal the systemic invisibility of the precarious section within the Indian model minority community. His presence in the United States is tolerated only as he serves the economic needs. But as a migrant Indian worker, he is denied any social and legal protection. Moreover, His constant movement between exploitative workplaces and his fear of detection reveal the psychological effects of being a racialized, albeit "illegal" migrant. Desai (2006) narrates Biju's feelings:

Clumsy in America, a giant-sized midget, a bigfat-sized helping of small Shouldn't he return to a life where he might slice his own importance, to where he might relinquish this overrated control over his own destiny and perhaps be subtracted from its determination altogether? He might even experience that greatest luxury of not noticing himself at all. (p. 268)

He comprehended his uneasiness of existence in America and the importance of being "invisible" among his own people, rather than being negatively visible in America for his racial, cultural, and economic marginal positions. His experiences reveal the intra-diasporic hierarchies hidden by model minority stereotyping. While the highly skilled migrants are positioned closer to social inclusion, as Subhash gets married to Elise in the later phase of his life to finally settle down, the working-class individuals like Biju remain excluded from both representation and opportunity in America and are mostly forced to "return", as Biju did.

Conditional Inclusion and the Politics of Being "Needed"

In both novels, the migrant subjects are pitted against conditional inclusion based on economic and institutional structures, but they remain socially and culturally excluded on racial grounds. Lahiri's protagonist finds institutional acceptance, but a sense of social approximation is missing due to his migrant and Indian status. His entry into academia or his service as a skilled professional both signal a conditional inclusion. Subhash inhabits solitary routines throughout his life, devoid of an affective inclusion in the lives of white Americans. He has always been a person or a professional who is "needed" for his capacity to contribute or stabilize. As a person, he assisted Richard, as a roommate with chores, and extended emotional support to Holly, who was living with her nine-year-old kid, being "separated" from her husband. Further, his wedlock to Elise in her old age can be interpreted as a companionship to a deserted old American lady. As a professional, he is included for his ability to contribute to academic excellence and to advance the existing scientific knowledge in "marine chemistry." Subhash speaks to his long-lost friend, Richard, about his professional life and his feeling of "different" loneliness:

A wife from whom he was estranged, a daughter who had grown up and moved away. A job at the same coastal research lab he'd been with nearly thirty years. Some consulting work on oil spills from time to time, or for the town's Department of Public Works. He was without a family, just as he'd been when he'd known Richard. (Lahiri, 2013, p. 293)

In contrast, Biju's trajectory in *The Inheritance of Loss* exposes the logic of being "needed" in its most raw format. His menial labour in the restaurants of New York illustrates how migrants' cheap labour becomes essential to profit-making, yet no one is ready to take up civic inclusion by providing him opportunities for health care or social well-being. He lived in the rat-infested basement of Gandhi Cafe in New York. When he broke his knee in the kitchen, the owner denied the "responsibility" to take him to a hospital. Rather, the owner, Harish-Harry, blames Biju for not cleaning the floor and living like animals. Biju retaliates:

"Without us living like pigs, said Biju, "what business would you have? This is how you make your money, paying us nothing because you know we can't do anything, making us work day and night because we are illegal. Why don't you sponsor us for our green cards?" (Desai, 2006, p. 188).

In fact, Biju's menial service is indispensable to the system of capitalistic consumption. His value as a "need" is purely economic, without ensuring him any civic rights or recognition. His repeated experiences of underpayment, job switch, poor living conditions, or the fear of

deportation highlight his profound precarious status as an illegal Indian migrant. Thus, both texts reveal the conditional inclusion of the Indian Diaspora who equally face affective and social exclusion for being a racial minority. Both migrant subjects are incorporated into the American society, but not as full participants, rather as functional contributors.

Conclusion

This paper highlights that diasporic subjectivity is not a unified condition across all members of a community. The internal stratification complicates the narrative of collective success circulated by “model minority” discourse. This paper has argued that the “model minority” is not a neutral sociological label; it is a discourse produced within regimes of power to regulate and discipline the racial minorities, especially the non-white immigrants. In consolidating this argument, the paper has drawn on theoretical frameworks of power and discourse by Michel Foucault, diaspora identity and belonging as illustrated by eminent scholars such as Hall and Bhabha, along with the basic tenets of critical race theory. The analytical approach offers a nuanced understanding of diasporic subjectivity within the racialized history of the United States. The study has demonstrated that the apparent success of the Indian Diaspora in the United States is the only condition to get incorporated into the American neoliberal economy. But a mere incorporation into the economic framework does not guarantee a full social and cultural belonging. The analysis has been limited to the experiences of the immigrant Indians represented in Lahiri’s *The Lowland* and Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* to demonstrate the disjunction between outward “success” and the persistent internal experience of alienation and precarity. These two novels provide only a segmented representation of privileged and precarious migrant experiences, leaving aside the diversity and heterogeneity of the broader South Asian Diaspora. The study may not entirely capture the experiences of undocumented migrants, religious minorities, gendered labour, or second-generation diasporic subjects. Other contemporary Indian-American diasporic texts may complicate the argument presented in this article by entangling multiple axes in the discussion of diaspora belonging and visibility. Further studies can expand the inquiry by including other South Asian diasporic narratives to examine diasporic subjectivity across Asian-American communities.

References

- Abraham, A. P. (2017). Postcolonial dilemmas in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*. *Journal for Research Scholars and Professionals of English Language Teaching*, 1(3).

- Alkhodairy, B. (2024). Psychoanalytic exploration of identity and loss in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*. *AWEJ for Translation & Literary Studies*, 8(2).
- Anand, D. (2009). Diasporic subjectivity as an ethical position. *South Asian Diaspora*, 1(2), 103–111. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19438190903109412>
- Bell, D. A. (1980). Brown v. Board of Education and the interest-convergence dilemma. *Harvard Law Review*, 93(3), 518–533. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1340546>
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Cohen, R. (1996). Diasporas and the state: From victims to challengers. *International Affairs*, 72(3), 507–520.
- Dash, B. B. (2014). A critical study on the themes and techniques of Kiran Desai's fictions. *International Journal of English: Literature, Language & Humanities* (2)5, 269- 285.
- Davis, C. (2006). Diasporic subjectivities. *French Cultural Studies*, 17(3), 335–348. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957155806068096>
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2023). *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, (Fourth Edition), United States: NYU Press.
- Demir, I. (2022). Theories of Diaspora and their limitations. In *Diaspora as translation and decolonisation* (pp. 13-34). Manchester University Press.
- Desai, K. (2006). *The Inheritance of Loss*. Penguin Books.
- Eldiasty, A. A. (2022). A geocritical reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*. *Beni-Suef University International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4(1), 9-34.
- Ferguson, J. P. (2009). Violent Dis-Placements: Natural and human violence in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*. *The journal of Commonwealth literature*, 44(2), 35-49.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977*. Edited by Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. (2nd edition), Vintage Books.
- Gnanasekaran, D. (2008). Treatment of the marginalized in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*. *Poetcrit*, 21(2).

- Golla, K. K. (2016). Facing the postcolonial dilemmas: A study of Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. *International Research Journal of Management Sociology & Humanity*, 7(1).
- Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and Diaspora. In *Identity: Community, culture, difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford (pp. 222- 237), London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Jackson, E. (2016). Globalization, Diaspora and cosmopolitanism in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*. *Ariel: A review of international English literature*, 47(4), 25-43.
- Jayaram, N. (2009). The study of Indian Diaspora. *Sociology and social anthropology in India*. Indian Council of Social Science Research.
- Khadka, P. B. (2021). A critical peep into identity crisis in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*. *European Journal of Molecular and Clinical Medicine*, 8(1), 579-583.
- Kour, M. (2016). The crisis of identity in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*. *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, 4(2), 871-877.
- Kumar, D. (2026). Transnational feminism and fragmented identities: Reimagining female subjectivity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*. *Journal of Advance and Future Research*, 4(1), 346-349. <https://rjwave.org/jaafr/papers/JAAFR2601173.pdf>
- Lahiri, J. (2013). *The Lowland*. United Kingdom, Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Lee, S. J. (2009). *Unraveling the "model minority" stereotype: Listening to Asian American youth*. Teachers College Press.
- Mishra, V. (2007). *The literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the diasporic imaginary*. Routledge.
- Neha. (2025). The notion of 'Nation' in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*. *TPM–Testing, Psychometrics, Methodology in Applied Psychology*, 32(S8), 3007-3014.
- Owen, D. (2005). American identity, citizenship, and multiculturalism. In *German-American Conference cosponsored by the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung and the Center for Civic Education, Freiburg, Germany, September* (pp.1-16). <https://new.civiced.org/pdfs/germanPaper0905/DianaOwen2005.pdf>
- Pandurang, M. (2017). Diasporic subjectivity: Of loss, memory, being and becoming. In *Routledge Handbook of the Indian Diaspora* (pp. 366-376). Routledge.

- Pius, T. K. (2014). Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*: A critical analysis. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 19(10), 100-117.
- Raina, J. A. (2018). Reflections on Indian diasporic fiction: A review with reference to Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai. *Language in India*, 18(12).
<https://languageinindia.com/dec2018/rainadiasporicfictionfinal.pdf>
- Sabo, O. (2012). Disjunctures and Diaspora in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 47(3), 375-392. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989412450697>
- Safran, W. (1991). Diasporas in modern societies: Myths of homeland and return. *Diaspora: A journal of transnational studies*, 1(1), 83-99.
- Saran, R. (2016). *Navigating model minority stereotypes: Asian Indian youth in South Asian Diaspora*. Routledge.
- Tölölyan, K. (2018). Diaspora studies: Past, present and promise. In *Routledge handbook of diaspora studies* (pp. 22-30). Routledge.



Between Ritual and Refusal: Reimagining Gendered Scripts in South Asian Film

Afsana Afsar Tuly

Doctoral Student

English Department

The University of Texas at Arlington,
USA

Email: afsana.afsartuly@uta.edu

Abstract

This analysis looks at how the films *Mrs. (India)* and *Utshob* (Bangladesh) portray gender as something built and policed within the home. Instead of treating femininity as an inherent trait, both movies show it as a series of repetitive chores and physical habits. I use Judith Butler's ideas on performativity to show how these everyday gestures create a sense of identity, while drawing on Foucault and Bordo to look at the strict discipline found in household routines. Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on intersectionality helps explain how class and family ties change the way these women can push back. Meanwhile, Sara Ahmed's affect theory provides a lens for seeing silence and hesitation as actual political choices. By looking closely at the camera work and pacing, I argue that these films find agency in small, quiet moments. Rather than loud rebellion, *Mrs.* and *Utshob* turn the kitchen and the living room into spaces where women can finally redefine themselves.

Keywords: gender performativity; South Asian cinema; feminist film theory; domestic labor.



Received: 27.04.2026

Accepted: 09.06.2026

Published: 15.06.2026

CJHSSC, Volume: 2

Issue: 1, June 2026

Page: 14 - 25

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20644486>

Copyright: Author © 2026



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Published by: Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College,
Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Available at: www.sjlangirlscollege.org.in/journal.php

Email: confluence.sjgc@gmail.com

Introduction:

South Asian movies have not completely escaped the shadow of patriarchy, but the way women appear on screen has changed a lot over the last fifty years. In Indian and Bengali cinema, especially, we have moved past the old tropes where women were just ornaments or sacrificial figures. Dicke and Durah (2010) claim that early popular films usually gave women zero autonomy, casting them as obedient mothers or wives without much of an inner life. That started to shift in the 1970s with parallel cinema. Filmmakers like Satyajit Ray began focusing on what women actually thought and felt. Daya (2017) argues that by showing female characters with their own doubts and desires, these Bengali films were making an early feminist move that the mainstream world was ignoring. Banerjee (2018) even suggests that in more recent Bengali films, female characters act as sites of dissent, turning the story itself into a space for resistance. In Bollywood, things are messier. It has been a slow, often contradictory transition. Ayushi (2021) notes that while women's roles have shifted from victimhood toward empowerment since the 50s, objectification has not gone away. There is still a lot of "gender policing" in commercial hits. If a female lead sticks to the "ideal" version of femininity, she is rewarded; if she does not, the plot usually punishes her. But the post-liberalization era has at least made these tensions more visible, allowing for more critical stories. Rather than seeing gender as something natural or fixed, modern South Asian films often treat it as a performance. In *Mrs.* (India) and *Utsab* (Bangladesh), gender is built through chores, physical discipline, and the heavy weight of social expectations. I am adopting the ideas of Butler, Foucault, Bordo, Crenshaw, and Ahmed to see how characters push back against patriarchal rules in small ways, like a repeated gesture, some long silences, or just an emotional refusal. Both films use framing and mise-en-scène to suggest that resistance does not always need to be loud. The home is not just where women follow a script; it is where they quietly rewrite it.

Background and context of the films:

Arati Kadav's *Mrs.* (2024) appeared in the context of modern Hindi cinema at a time when gendered labor and emotional care in middle-class Indian households were being reexamined. The movie centers on Richa, an educated dancer whose artistic career is cut short after she marries a doctor in an arranged marriage. Despite the fact that her father-in-law works as a doctor, which might otherwise indicate a family accustomed to contemporary gender norms, this union effectively confines her to a traditional patriarchal model of domesticity. This restrictive

dynamic is best illustrated by the mother-in-law who has a doctorate in economics but has seen her intellectual life completely subordinated to household maintenance. The erasure of female identity in favor of patriarchal respectability is symbolized by the frequent depictions of her in the kitchen or doing chores, such as shining her husband's shoes. The movie shows Richa's increasing internal conflict and weariness despite her initial attempts to adjust to this domestic setting. She starts to wonder if marriage is worth the loss of her independence as she oversees household duties and stifles her artistic aspirations. The story ends without the usual melodrama when Richa finally decides to end the marriage. Rather, her exit is portrayed as a composed and determined attempt to recover her unique identity.

Kadav's style has been recognized by film scholars as part of a post-2010 trend in Hindi cinema toward interiority-centered feminist narratives that highlight the common experiences of women that mainstream Bollywood frequently ignores (Gopal, 2011; Thomas, 2014). Comparable to *The Great Indian Kitchen* and *Thappad*, *Mrs.* steers clear of cinematic spectacle in favor of developing its critique through the portrayal of tedious household tasks. Scholarly studies on Indian domestic cinema suggest that these depictions of physical fatigue are visual techniques employed to highlight the emotional burdens of patriarchal marriage (Sridhar, 2019; Chakravarty, 2020). Richa's experiences seem to support Susan Bordo's (1993) theory of the disciplined female body, which is shaped by internalized expectations of subservience. In this way, the domestic settings in the movie function as what Patricia Uberoi (1990) refers to as the intimate theater of patriarchy, where gender roles are both performed and enforced. However, *Mrs.* concentrates on a personal story of rejection while Tanim Noor's *Utsbob* (2025) offers a more comprehensive examination of gendered constraints in Bengali society.

Even though the movie is set around an extended family get-together, the main emotional conflict concerns a young Bangladeshi couple whose marriage starts to fall apart when the husband tries to stop his wife from enrolling in a prestigious university. Her ultimate choice to file for divorce highlights the conflict between female ambition and traditional marital expectations and places her rejection within a conservative cultural framework. This story seems to fit the characteristics of post-parallel Bengali cinema, which often makes use of ensemble structures to explore the breakdown of kinship and emotional disillusionment in contemporary South Asian families (Ghosh, 2010; Vasudevan, 2011). By depicting women as the symbolic guardians of family honor, feminist film critics have observed that these films frequently put women at the center of domestic crises (Sarkar, 2001; Bose, 2012). *Utsbob* highlights this dynamic

by illustrating how each woman's choices are impacted by a mix of social expectations, financial considerations, and marital responsibilities, mirroring the intersectional pressures outlined by Kimberlé Crenshaw.

While *Mrs.* examines how multiple women negotiate gendered roles in a shared space, *Utsbob* (2024) follows a single protagonist navigating domestic expectations. Feminist interpretations of South Asian art cinema that highlight the cinematic expression of unspoken female interiority are in line with Dasgupta's formal techniques, such as lingering shots and overlapping dialogue (Geetha, 2002). In this context, quiet and fleeting looks take on political significance, revealing the underlying tensions about female autonomy that surface during family rituals. Together, *Mrs.*, an important advancement in South Asian feminist film, is represented in *Utsbob*. Idealized portrayals of domestic harmony are being replaced by more nuanced depictions of female agency and resistance. These films challenge the gendered stereotypes that have historically defined South Asian womanhood through their narrative structures and visual forms.

Arati Kadav's *Mrs.* and Buddhadeb DasGupta's *Utsbob* provide an important starting point for examining poststructuralist and feminist discussions about power, gender, and subjectivity. The analytical frameworks required to comprehend how these films both create and contest gendered identities have been made available by research situated at the nexus of these theories. The rejection of women as a single or pre-constituted subject is a major theme in this scholarship. According to Jana Sawicki, feminist theory needs to take into consideration the material distinctions among women, such as caste, class, sexual orientation, and cultural background. She contends that rather than being obstacles to unity, these are creative tools for a politics of difference. Drawing from Audre Lorde's writings, Sawicki argues that the systemic erasure and silencing of differences is what causes fragmentation within feminism rather than differences themselves. She proposes, in line with Foucault, that the pursuit of a single revolutionary subject should be abandoned in feminist politics. Rather, it is argued that theory ought to look at the everyday intimate and domestic power dynamics that underlie resistance and subordination.

The subject of feminism is further complicated by Judith Butler's criticism. Butler shows in *Gender Trouble* that legal and representational systems actively create gendered subjects rather than just describing them. Only regulatory norms—such as legal, cultural, and linguistic frameworks—that specify which gendered bodies are identifiable make categories like women seem stable and exclusive. By contending that sex is a discursive construct shaped by the same

norms that govern gender and desire, Butler challenges the conventional division between sex and gender. This change is essential to her theory of performance, which views gender as a series of repeated actions that give the appearance of stability rather than a fixed identity. This viewpoint is essential to understanding Richa's monotonous domestic work in *Mrs.* and the organized family dynamics in *Utsbob*, where gender only seems consistent because it is carried out continuously. The examination of power by Michel Foucault offers an additional theoretical framework for this research. His criticism of the juridico-discursive model casts doubts on the idea that power is possessed or centralized. Rather, he views contemporary power as relational, productive, and ingrained in daily activities.

In addition to formal institutions, disciplinary power also operates through self-regulation, normalization, and surveillance. Feminist theorists who study how diffuse and frequently imperceptible forms of regulation shape women's physical presence, emotional labor, and household routines will find this reconceptualization helpful. The stories of both *Mrs.* and *Utsbob* revolve around these components, where the subtle demands of their surroundings shape the lives of the characters. Building on Foucault, academics like Sandra Bartky and Susan Bordo contend that disciplinary measures that condition women's bodies to be submissive create femininity. Bartky famously asks why the particular behaviors that produce women's docile bodies are often ignored in conventional narratives of discipline.

In a similar vein, Bordo explains how women were socialized to occupy little emotional and physical space through dietary regimens, self-monitoring, and physical discipline. *Mrs.* can greatly benefit from these analyses, where Richa's quiet, monotonous movements in the kitchen accentuate her inferior status. They also apply to *Utsbob*, where the female characters' postures and body language convey their restricted independence within the family unit. This investigation is extended into the affective domain by Sara Ahmed. According to Ahmed's arguments in *The Promise of Happiness* and her discussions on the feminist killjoy, women who refuse to uphold domestic harmony by recognizing sexism or refraining from their emotional labor are frequently blamed for unhappiness.

This framework makes *Mrs.*'s emotional dynamics more understandable, in which Richa's tiredness and silence serve as forms of resistance rather than as signs of weakness. Similar to this, in *Utsbob*, women's emotional conflicts—which manifest as hesitations, glances, or silent rejections—become important sites of feminist disruption where the status quo is quietly challenged. These customs are used by feminist film scholarship to analyze how women's

representation has changed in South Asian cinema. Traditional Indian cinema frequently depicted women as virtuous, sacrificial, or merely decorative, which suppressed female desire while stabilizing patriarchal themes. More recent critiques indicate a change toward more complex depictions of agency, ambivalence, and refusal, particularly in movies that emphasize women's daily hardships and labor. Through gesture, silence, and framing, Bengali art and parallel cinema have historically provided more nuanced viewpoints on women's interiority, exploring their challenges with patriarchal boundaries. Women's lives are situated at the intersection of class, kinship, and modern pressures according to research on filmmakers, such as Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak. Theory gives us a fresh perspective on these movies.

Domestic labor is a key location of cinematic politics, according to modern feminist criticism. Female labor is treated as something futile or worthless in the film *The Great Indian Kitchen*. Cooking and cleaning reflect how patriarchy controls women's activities. Males view these kitchen chores as inherent. Nepali movies, such as *Saino*, have normalized women's chores. At the start of the movie, Anu, the main female character, is seen working around the house with her mother while her father is seated on a floor mat, drinking his local wine and placing an order. He is depicted as both the commander and the head of the family (Sherma,2025). In a similar vein, *Mrs.* and *Utsob* both highlight physical and emotional labor as outward manifestations of gendered oppression while staging refusal moments that upend patriarchal cycles. However, South Asian women's experiences differ greatly by caste, religion, class, and geography according to intersectional feminist scholars. Unmarried daughters, middle-class wives, and rural women face different limitations and have different access to agency. This supports Crenshaw's claim that gender analysis is inextricably linked to other axes of power and difference. When combined, these theoretical perspectives offer three frameworks for examining *Mrs.* and *Utsob*, each of which is crucial to comprehending the development of feminist politics in South Asian cinema.

Gender must first be viewed as disciplined, affective, and performative. Drawing from Butler, Foucault, Bordo, and Ahmed, this viewpoint demonstrates that gender is a collection of repeated behaviors, emotional commitments, and physical disciplines rather than a stable identity. Acknowledging this makes it possible for feminist politics to develop by demonstrating how patriarchal expectations shape women and where instances of disruption or rejection take place. Because they challenge gender norms from within the protagonists' gestures, silences, and affective withdrawals in both movies take on political significance. Second, South Asian cinema

is an essential visual archive for depicting the emotional lives, labor, and subtle forms of resistance of women. The micro-practices of gendered labor that are concealed in prevailing narratives, such as cooking, caring for others, waiting, and controlling emotions, can be made visible through film, unlike written texts. By emphasizing these customs, *Mrs.* and *Utsbob* turn routine household tasks into feminist criticisms of patriarchy. Thus, feminist politics manifests not only in overt acts of rebellion but also in the visual expression of weariness, discontent, and subdued defiance. Third, feminist analysis needs to consider how gender interacts with kinship class and cultural context. The unequal distribution of agency in both movies is highlighted by intersectionality: middle-class wives, financially dependent daughters-in-law, and single women face very different limitations and opportunities. By demonstrating that patriarchy functions differently across social positions and that resistance cannot be comprehended independently of these structural conditions, this intersectional lens strengthens feminist politics.

Feminist politics, as demonstrated by *Mrs.* and *Utsbob*, is not universally applicable; rather, it is shaped by the lived realities of women situated within familial, economic, and cultural systems. It is feasible to interpret both movies as political interventions when these three pillars are taken together. They show how narrative and cinematic form combine to reveal gendered power, question patriarchal conventions, and envision different ways of being and resisting in South Asian society.

Whose Agency Is Centered, Erased, or Reframed?

In order to comprehend feminist politics in *Mrs.* and *Utsbob*, one must look at how agency is framed, distributed, or withheld in the movies, as well as which characters oppose patriarchal systems. According to feminist academics, agency is the ability to inhabit and negotiate conditions that are not of one's own choosing rather than just the ability to act (Mahmood, 2005). In this way, both movies subvert oversimplified liberation narratives by portraying agency as a range of actions, rejections, and agreements influenced by social context. Richa's agency is crucial and limited in *Mrsdot*. Her embodied routines—cooking, cleaning, and quiet endurance—tell her story almost entirely, allowing viewers to read her interiority through gestures rather than words. The movie highlights her capacity to refuse to comply while also making the psychological and physical costs of domestic work visible. What Sara Ahmed refers to as non-existence that expects happiness is made up of little things like her hesitancy before going into the kitchen, her eyes lingering on her abandoned dance shoes, or her refusal to smile when expected (Ahmed, 2010).

Rather than being presented as a victorious rebellion, Richa's decision to end the marriage is the result of a series of micro-refusals that gradually undermine the gendered script she has been expected to follow. But the movie also highlights the boundaries of agency. The mother-in-law is portrayed as someone whose potential has been completely consumed by domestic duties, even though she holds a doctorate in economics. The world of the movie erases her intellectual labor in the same way that the home erases it. In contrast, Richa's husband is portrayed as an agent with unquestioned personal and professional autonomy. As a result, *Mrs.* criticizes both individual men and patriarchal systems that marginalize female agency in the home and elevate male agency as the norm. According to *Utsob*, agency is distributed more widely. Wives, sisters, daughters, and in-laws make up its ensemble of women, which emphasizes how unequal women's autonomy is in extended family structures. While some characters quietly rebel against oppressive expectations, others internalize or submit to them. The young wife who chooses to end her marriage is a prime example of agency based on aspirations for education and self-assertion. Her refusal to compromise her academic prospects for her husband's insecurity is consistent with what Kimberlé Crenshaw refers to as intersectional bargaining, in which women are required to balance their choices against a variety of constraints (Crenshaw, 1991).

But *Utsob* also shows how social surveillance and familial responsibilities can eradicate agency. There is little room for refusal for older women daughters-in-law who are financially dependent or people who are obligated to stay at home. Often their desires only come to the surface when they steal looks, hold back words, or withdraw emotionally. Such silences can be expressions of agency that endure despite the impossibility of voice according to Bengali film scholars (Sarkar, 2001). By emphasizing several types of agency, including relational, quite assertive, and confined, *Mrs.* and *Utsob* broaden feminist interpretations of resistance. They demonstrate that women's agency involves more than just escaping oppressive circumstances; it also involves enduring, negotiating, or quietly challenging the circumstances that mold their lives.

The Digital Afterlife of *Mrs.* and *Utsob*: Social Media, Humor, and Feminist Publics:

Outside of their movie theaters, *Mrs.* and *Utsob* have created lively afterlives on South Asian social media sites where audiences—especially women—reinterpret, discuss, and share the film's feminist themes. This digital interaction is important because, according to media scholar Nancy Baym, online platforms allow marginalized voices to reframe dominant narratives (Baym, 2010). As a result, social media turns personal grievances into group criticism, extending feminist politics. Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have been inundated with short videos frequently

with humor and satire that reenact scenes from *Mrs.* and *Utsob* in both Bangladesh and India. Following *Mrs.*, Indian women shared videos that imitate Richa's household responsibilities, such as never-ending cooking chore lists and emotional support, along with captions like the modern Indian wife's daily struggle or why we are tired. Instead of trivializing the movie's message, these humorous reenactments carry out what Sara Ahmed refers to as feminist reorientation, drawing attention to the systems that deplete women's mental and physical resources (Ahmed, 2017).

Humor turns into a survival and critique strategy, a way to identify patriarchal fatigue without worrying about social repercussions. Similar to this, *Utsob* generated a lot of discussion on Facebook in Bangladesh, where people applauded the female protagonist's choice to end the marriage and ridiculed the domineering male characters. Many comments celebrated the woman's refusal as proof that women today can think for themselves while framing the male characters as relics of antiquated masculinity, saying things like, in real life, these men are not men. These responses exemplify counter-public feminist discourse as defined by feminist media (Ray, 2009) in which women utilize digital platforms to challenge patriarchal norms and rethink female agency. Social media responses frequently have a tone that combines humor and criticism with what Jill Dolan refers to as the utopian performative, which are instances where cultural texts evoke sentiments of hope and collective recognition (Dolan, 2005).

Viewers create transient feminist communities that validate frustration, anger, and refusal by making fun of patriarchal characters and acting out scenes of domestic labor. These exchanges reveal a common awareness of domestic inequality, turning what is normally experienced in private into a public discourse. Importantly, these online responses also show how South Asian audiences' perceptions of women's agency have changed across generations. Younger viewers, in particular, praised Richa and *Utsob's* female lead for putting her own needs ahead of those of her spouse. Our mothers suffered silently, but we will not, said a popular comment from Bangladesh. Such claims are consistent with feminist theorists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who contends that when individual experiences of oppression are connected to larger sociopolitical structures, feminist consciousness arises (Mohanty, 2003). These online reactions alter the film's cultural circulation rather than being merely incidental commentary. Social media interpretations allow women to express their own readings of refusal, agency, and feminist politics while challenging traditional gatekeepers of meaning (critics, academics, and family elders). By using humor criticism and group storytelling, they turn the reception of *Mrs.* and *Utsob* into a democratic interactive process where viewers actively renegotiate gender

norms. In the end, these movies' digital legacies show that feminist politics are not limited to the screen. Women reclaim interpretive power through memes, reels, reenactments, and commentary, transforming commonplace digital spaces into spaces for resistance. Social media amplifies the film's critique of domestic patriarchy, promotes solidarity, and imagines new possibilities for South Asian womanhood, making it not only a site of reaction but also an essential part of feminist reception.

Conclusion:

Both *Mrs* and *Utsbob* demonstrate how gendered identities can be reinterpreted in South Asian film today. By emphasizing the everyday ways that gender is performed, upheld, or contested, these films depart from idealized portrayals of domesticity. Through their depictions of domestic duties and emotional compromise, both stories show how patriarchal structures are associated with everyday action. They show how women manage or change these systemic conditions through quiet persistence and day-to-day navigation. This analysis uses a variety of theoretical frameworks, such as Butler's performativity, Foucault's disciplinary power, Bordo's work on the body, Ahmed's affective refusal, and Crenshaw's intersectionality to examine how these cinematic representations interact with sociocultural systems. These frameworks contend that gender is the product of repetition and regulation rather than an innate trait. In both films, agency often manifests as quiet or subtle emotional changes that subvert domestic patriarchal norms.

Furthermore, the online reactions to these films indicate that feminist involvement extends well beyond the cinema. Scenes from *Mrs.* and *Utsbob* have been used by social media users in Bangladesh and India to criticize traditional masculinity and draw attention to domestic injustices. These conversations constitute what Sangeeta Ray calls counterpublic feminist discourse in which prevailing cultural norms are questioned by group reinterpretation through humor and shared experience. As a result, rather than being solely determined by their creators, the significance of these films is continuously changed by the audience members who engage with them. Ultimately, *Mrs.* and *Utsbob* make us reconsider the definition of resistance. They demonstrate that feminist action need not be limited to overt rebellion or public confrontation; it can also take the form of subdued refusals to pursue education or disruptive household routines.

By refusing to display typical emotional states like happiness for the benefit of others, the protagonists change the domestic environment. Instead of being depicted as a private sphere cut

off from politics, this area is seen as a significant site for work negotiation and potential social change. *Mrs.* and *Utsbob* adhere to a feminist cinematic tradition that highlights the visibility of female agency and desire by depicting women's inner lives and their battles against patriarchal structures. When combined, their visual aesthetics and narrative frameworks offer new insights into South Asian womanhood while challenging the enduring gender norms. By actively contributing to the transformation of current social conditions rather than merely reflecting them, these films demonstrate how cinema can be both a feminist medium and a vehicle for more significant cultural changes.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke University Press.
- Ayushi, S (2021). Representation of Women in Hindi Cinema: A Shift from Victimhood to Empowerment. *International Journal of Research and Development*, 3(4),1–12.
- Banerjee, S. C. (2018). Subject to Change: The Politics of Feminist Dissent in Bengali Cinema. *Journal of South Asian Film Studies*, 12(2), 295–312.
- Baym, N. K. (2015). *Personal connections in the digital age*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Bordo, S. (1993). *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. University of California Press.
- Bose, M. (2012). *Women in Bengali Cinema: Negotiating Modernity*. Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
- Chakravarty, S. (2020). Domesticity and the Aesthetics of Labor in Contemporary Hindi Film. *Film Quarterly*, 73(4), 28–39.
- Chatterjee, P. (1993). *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton University Press.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.
- Daya, R. (2017). Women's Subjectivity in Bengali Parallel Cinema. *Studies in South Asian Film and Media*, 9(1), 1–20.
- Dickey, S., & Dudrah, R. (2010). South Asian Cinemas: Widening the Lens. *South Asian Popular Culture*, 8(3), 207–212.
- Dolan, J. (2005). *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*. University of Michigan Press.

- Foucault, M. (1990). *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Vintage Books.
- Geetha, V. (2002). The Interior Landscape: Women's Emotions in Tamil and Bengali Art Cinema. *Journal of Moving Image Studies*, 1(2), 45–58.
- Ghosh, S. (2010). Gender, Desire, and Fractured Kinship in Post-Parallel Bengali Cinema. *Asian Cinema*, 21(1), 93–109.
- Gopal, S. (2011). *Conjugations: Marriage and Film in Contemporary India*. University of Chicago Press.
- Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton University Press.
- Mazumdar, R. (2007). *The Urban Interface: Figurations of the Cinematic City in Post-Liberalization India*. Routledge.
- Mohanty, C. T. (2003). *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Duke University Press.
- Ray, S. (2009). *Feminism and the Postcolonial: Contemporary Debates*. Routledge.
- Sarkar, B. (2009). *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition*. Duke University Press.
- Sawicki, J. (1986). Foucault and Feminism: Toward a Politics of Difference. *Hypatia*, 1(2), 23–36.
- Sherma, A. B. (2025). The Subtlety of Hegemonic Masculinity in Nepali Films through Digital Platforms: A Critique of the Film Saino. *SCHOLARS: Journal of Arts & Humanities*, 7(1), 94–110, <https://doi.org/10.3126/sjah.v7i1.75681>
- Sridhar, S. (2019). Gendered Rhythms of Labor in Domestic Space: Aesthetic Strategies in New Hindi Cinema. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 26(2), 145–165.
- Thomas, R. (2014). *Bombay Before Bollywood: Film City Fantasies*. Orient Blackswan.
- Uberoi, P. (1990). The Family in Indian Cinema. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 21(2), 281–293.
- Vasudevan, R. (2011). *The Melodramatic Public: Film Form and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema*. Permanent Black.



You Are Not Good Enough: Gendered Discourses of Inadequacy and the Construction of Female Subjectivity

Dr. Rakhi Param Sawlani

Independent Researcher
Mumbai, Maharashtra, India.

Email: dr.rakhisawlani@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the discourse of inadequacy expressed through various phrases, focusing on terms inspired by the work of feminist writers and thinkers, like 'not feminine enough', 'the other', 'inessential', 'object', 'strong black woman', 'woman question', 'anonymous', 'second place', and 'the female aspect' in everyday life. It shows how these ideas shape the way women see themselves, affecting female subjectivity across philosophical, literary, and socio-cultural contexts. It explores the inadequacy found in the recurrent phrase "You are not good enough" as a form of gendered power to determine how women would want to perceive themselves. The paper argues that inadequacy is not a natural or personal flaw in women; instead, it is created and maintained through social beliefs, language, and cultural practices. Women are repeatedly made to feel inadequate about their bodies, language, beauty, intelligence, ambition, aspiration, performance, and moral character. The paper attempts to place this feeling of 'not being enough' in a broader social context. It shows how patriarchy, colourism, caste hierarchy, creed, and marital mediators compel women to be independent yet always accommodating and pleasing to others. Women are persuaded to dream big and be ambitious, but also told to be modest and selfless. In the article, inadequacy accounts for a powerful mechanism built into common language, media roles, images, familial rules, and workplace procedures. It calls for questioning and resisting everyday comments and judgments that normalise women as 'less than' or 'not enough'. Finally, it debates a deeper structural change in society that defines what is acceptable, competent, and worthy so that women are not measured by narrow gender standards of 'good enough'.

Keywords: Gendered Discourse; Inadequacy; Female Subjectivity; Feminist Theory; Identity Formation.



Received: 30.04.2026

Accepted: 02.06.2026

Published: 15.06.2026

CJHSSC, Volume: 2

Issue: 1, June 2026

Page: 26 - 34

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20646029>

Copyright: Author © 2026



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Published by: Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College,
Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

Available at: www.ssjalangirlscollege.org.in/journal.php
Email: confluence.ssjgc@gmail.com

Introduction

The discourse of inadequacy, inscribed in the repeating message ‘You are not good enough’, acts as a potent socio-cultural mechanism that churns out women’s identities across historical and contemporary settings. Feminist Philosophy, literature, and theory have repeatedly shown that inadequacy is not a natural quality of women but a socially produced condition embedded in power relations and power structures. The renowned works of feminist authors chart a clear intellectual path, where gendered inadequacy is discursively constructed, institutionally reinforced, psychologically internalised, and normatively regulated.

Structural Otherness

The Second Sex provides the philosophical basis for understanding gendered inadequacy, where Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2011) argues that the word “Other” indicates the position of women in a male-dominated symbolic order. Beauvoir’s critique of women’s structural marginalisation in *The Second Sex* (2011) establishes gendered inadequacy as structural rather than individual. ‘Man’ is seen as the essential “subject” (the absolute), the norm, whereas women are treated as “objects”, always defined relationally and secondarily by others. This relational hierarchy engenders an implicit discourse of insufficiency, where women are positioned as derivatives of male norms. Beauvoir’s famous statement that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (p.293) shows how gendered identity is constructed through repeated acts of restriction and instruction. Man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him, suggesting yet a structural positioning of woman as secondary — ‘inherently less’. Women are not competitors but complements to men. She has no rights, no power.

In Beauvoir’s analysis, the social construction of women as “the other” is examined in depth. The society teaches women to see themselves as “the other”, not as full, independent subjects. From childhood, girls are brought up in a male context, such as daughters, sisters, to-be-wives, to-be-daughter-in-law, and to-be-mothers. So, they are defined more by what they do for others than by their own choices and desires. Instead of being encouraged to act with their own agency, they are often marked by what they supposedly lack: independence, authority, and rationality. Because of this, they repeatedly hear, in direct and indirect ways, that they are less rational, less in control, and less important than men. Over the course of time, these sentences influence how they envisage themselves and what is possible for their lives. They start to accept narrow ideas about what they can or should become.

In this way, 'not good enough' is not just about a few depraved flashes or remarks, but instead an enduring feeling that grows from how girls are raised and what they are told is an acceptable role. From a young age, they learn that their dreams and goals must fit what society expects of 'good women', rather than what they might truly want for themselves. To be feminine means to be weak, passive, pleasing, and not too assertive, gradually being trained into a position of otherness and inferiority. These subtle and repeated lessons become internal messages: 'Do not aim too high'; 'Do not compete with men'; 'You are too much, or you are not enough'. Beauvoir's articulation of women's existential condition in *The Second Sex*, the process of becoming a woman means learning to see oneself as secondary and inadequate against a male standard.

Material Exclusion and Intellectual Marginalisation

If Beauvoir theorizes 'structural otherness', Virginia Woolf dramatizes its material consequences in *A Room of One's Own* (1929). She argues that economic deprivation and institutional exclusion lead to perceptions of female intellectual deficiency. Women have been excluded from upright formal education, financial independence, and a rich literary tradition. The absence of female authors in the canon of history was thus construed as evidence of lesser capacity. Woolf shows what inadequacy feels like in concrete and everyday terms, like "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction". This line shows that women are not 'naturally less talented' but are blocked by material conditions. They often have no independent income, no private space, and constant demands on their time. These limits quietly send the message that serious thinking and writing are not really meant for them.

When Woolf says, "For most of history, anonymous was a woman", it implies erasure and systemic dismissal of women's creative identity. She is drawing attention to how many women creators were made invisible. Their books, paintings, and music were not published, were ignored, and were credited to men instead of them. This line hints at a long history in which women did important creative work, but their names were removed, never recorded, and hence they disappeared from view. Beneath this is a deep feeling of frustration and sadness; women were 'good enough' to create, but 'not good enough' to be recognised. Women are told through poverty, lack of space, and erasure that they are 'not good enough' to appear as authors in their own right. Thus, a woman needs basic financial security and private space of her own to think and write, because without money or a room, she is constantly interrupted, dependent, and made to feel that her ideas do not really matter.

Woolf reconnoiters the structural constrictions and cultural conversations that tell women they are less capable of intellectual toil. Women writers in history have been using the phrase ‘there is no tradition,’ which meant they are not good enough to produce literature of value. Woolf reframes this as a discursive barrier that inhibits women’s creative identities. Woolf’s imaginary “Shakespeare’s sister” (p.87) illustrates how structural barriers produce what seems inadequate. She has no education; she has no freedom. Her talent is unrecognised. The silence that comes after this is mistaken for inability. Woolf’s analysis reveals the systematic withholding of possessions, such as denying them money, time, and space, withstands the rhetoric of ‘not good enough’. Inadequacy here is a consequence of deprivation, not of any inherent deficiency. She insists that a woman needs ‘money and a room of her own’ to foreground the material prerequisites of intellectual legitimacy.

Internalisation and Psychological Embodiment

Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) writes about how a girl takes the feeling of not being good enough deep inside herself, focusing on the inner, psychological damage this causes. This process reveals the psychological internalisation of inadequacy, while Beauvoir and Woolf revealed how society and institutions are organised in a way that keeps women down. The discourse of inadequacy is enacted through media versions, community mockery, and family violence, and eventually, those occurrences outside stories became inside truths. In her novel, Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl, grows up in a world that constantly praises white, blue-eyed beauty. She comes to believe that if she had blue eyes, people would finally love her and treat her kindly. In simple terms, Pecola thinks, if I looked like the beauty ideal, I would be worthy, which shows how racist beauty standards turn into personal feelings of shame and inadequacy. It displays a girl learning to see herself as ‘not good enough’ in a not-so-comforting way: when Pecola thinks that if her eyes were ‘beautiful’, she herself would be different. She is not just wishing for blue eyes. She wishes to be worthy of love, care, and respect. She starts to build the opinion that she can escape the shame only by changing herself to match the white ideal. The line “You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly” shows how judgments in the eyes of people become your own voice, turning external discrimination into internal denigration.

This novel exemplifies how cultural standards of beauty and worth shape young black girls’ self-image. Pecola’s wish for ‘bluer eyes’ is symbolic of internalised messages that ‘she is not good enough’ as she is. External social discourses about beauty are taken in as deeply personal stories of inadequacy. Morrison’s novel reveals that inadequacy is not just socially constructed

but personified. Pecola's sense of who she is depends on a world that treats white, 'blue-eyed beauty' as the highest standard for girls and women. As a result, Pecola starts to believe that her body is bad and cannot be loved. Her biggest wish is not only to look different but to get away from the hurt of always being seen as "ugly" and "less than others". The psychological damage mirrors how discourse penetrates subjectivity. In this context, 'You are not good enough' is an unspoken universal catchphrase shaping bodily awareness and self-worth. Pecola's entire experience can be read as the slow, painful absorption of the message 'You are not good enough' into her own sense of self. The racist and sexist beauty codes around her tell her, again and again, that a 'good girl' or 'beautiful girl' is white, light-skinned, and blue-eyed. She does not just hear this on one occasion but comes across it in pictures, toys, teachers' preferences, and commentaries at home. Blue eyes might take her from 'not enough' to 'enough', which damages her subjectivity.

Ideological Control and the Double Bind

In *Ain't I a Woman: Black women and feminism*, Bell Hooks (1981) expands her analysis by showing how dearth narratives work as ideological devices. Hooks argues that sexism does not kill women's power but limits or exploits it. Women are seen as either 'not enough or too much'; too emphatic or too emotive; not supportive enough or too self-determining. This double dilemma ensures that they are always being judged by shifting standards. We teach our young woman to shrink themselves, speak little, ask minimally, and to reduce their shine. This is a direct reflection of 'not enoughness' discourse, which shows socially regulated inadequacy messaging about their aspirations. We tell them, Girls!! You can 'be ambitious', but not 'too ambitious.' Women are often told two opposite things at the same time: they should have big dreams and be ambitious, but they must also stay modest, selfless, and obedient. Because of these mixed messages and unrealistic expectations, women are made to feel that they are never quite 'good enough' no matter what they do.

Advertisements announcing the sale of enslaved Black women used the terms "breeding slaves", "child-bearing woman", "breeding period", and "too old to breed" to describe individual women (p.39). Multiple notions or narratives of inadequacy work against Black women, damaging their perception of themselves, making their identities complex, and limiting their options. The black female who thought herself "too good" to do domestic work or other service jobs was often ridiculed for being uppity. (p.77). Depictions in media label black women as "too angry", "too loud", and not docile. Black women have always been regarded as "too uppity".

(p.103). Like the American white male in the 50s and 60s, black men were concerned that all women were becoming too assertive and domineering (p.180). It is essential to understand hooks' message that notions of inadequacy are a form of oppression by design, in identifying women as insufficient, patriarchal power can exercise control over them. Women get used to thinking that 'they are not enough', and they start aiming lower and holding themselves back. Even when people praise women as "strong" or "caring," these compliments often have conditions: they value women mainly for how well they serve others, especially men, rather than for their own dreams and needs.

Contemporary Social Conditioning and Aspirational Limits

In her book *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie shows how inadequacy has persisted even in progressive contexts. She mentions that young women are guided to 'shrink themselves', 'make themselves smaller', which means that they should keep their ambition slow lest they make men feel threatened. Whereas past discrimination was more blatant, the current discourse is based on subtle manipulation. Women can be stimulated to do well, but not too well. They can be asked to voice their opinions, but not too strongly. The examples Adichi gives include instances in which women and girls are constantly reminded that they are never enough - never intelligent enough, never focused enough, never strong enough for being only girls. This affects the esteem of young women, their professional expectations, and their sense of what they deserve. The main lesson we can learn from Adichie's work is that even empowerment discourses carry within them an element of subordination.

Normative Regulation and Performativity

The Theory behind such phenomena has been put forward by Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990). According to Butler, gender identity is constituted via continuous performances under normative inspection. Gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, suggesting the need for steady performance under normative inspection. Otherwise, there will be a judgment made about the inadequate performance. Social norms constantly define what constitutes a 'good woman', thus implicitly making other women inadequate. Inadequacy creates fear, making people conform to societal norms to avoid such feelings. Butler (1990) reminds us that "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, through a stylised repetition of acts" (p. 179). If gender is something we do again and again, then society also judges how well we do it. Those judgments decide whether we are seen as a "proper" woman or "not good enough" as a woman. When a

girl does not dress, speak, or behave in the expected “feminine way”, she may be told she is “too loud,” “too ambitious,” “not ladylike,” or “not a good woman.” These comments are forms of punishment for “doing gender wrong,” which Butler notes can range from criticism and exclusion to more serious sanctions. Over time, this constant policing of gender performance teaches women that their worth depends on how closely they match an ideal of femininity that no one can fully reach, keeping them in a constant state of feeling inadequate.

Beauvoir lays down the ontology of woman as “the other”, while Woolf discusses the actual processes through material and institutional mechanisms that create intellectual marginalisation. Morrison discusses how racialized and gendered inferiority becomes internalised in women. Hooks provides us with the ideological mechanisms of oppression, while Adichie focuses on contemporary society.

Comparative Synthesis

These authors collectively demonstrate that the discourses that say, “You are not good enough” do not only exist as personal attacks – they are part of larger structures of culture embodied in language, story, expectation, and institutional practice. The discourse impacts how women see themselves, frequently linking femininity to deficiency. It impacts the construction of the self through the internalisation of appropriate behaviour, ambition, and capability. It impacts career aspirations, whether through the limitations set on their ambitions or by making those ambitions socially dangerous. From the context of philosophy to literature and to feminism, woman as the “other” denotes structural inadequacy; her splendour and the standards of value denote cultural inadequacy; drive and desires denote aspirational inadequacy; thought and talk denote epistemic inadequacy. “You are not good enough” goes as a cultural catchphrase for women rather than an isolated insult, a cultural message catalysing their identity, self-confidence, and life trajectories.

Each author discusses the different contexts of entirely different fields, but more or less reveals the same socially produced inadequacy. A contradictory note that women must be strong yet submissive, motivated yet modest, independent yet interactive, because these expectations are doomed to fail if these qualities cannot coexist, the resulting sense of “not enoughness” is not accidental but systemic. This body of literature collectively suggests that inadequacy serves as a mechanism of power. It disciplines bodies, regulates ambition, and forms identity. The discourse of patriarchy makes women feel that they are never good enough, making them obey without any direct force. The convergence in these feminist perspectives points towards the importance

of looking at inadequacy as a discursive construct rather than a personal problem. Between modernism and postmodernism, it is clear that subjectivities develop out of language and image. “You are not good enough” as a structural catchphrase enables a shift from personal records of insecurity towards analysing how inadequacy functions across institutions such as marriage, home, families, schools, circles, and the workplace. The prevalence of such discourse across time and space advocates its deep-rooted standing in arrangements of gender control.

Together, these thinkers and authors provide a complex model to understand gender inadequacy. Structural positioning, material deprivation, psychological internalisation, ideological control, aspirational conditioning, and performative regulation intersect to create a powerful cultural story of insufficiency that continues to form women’s self-perception, identity, and social participation in contemporary contexts. Based on their writings, the inadequacy construction is not random or psychological; instead, it is constructed by language and sustained by institutions. From existentialism, modernism, feminism, and performativity, these authors show how the position of women is rendered as structural “Otherness,” material exclusion, symbolic misrepresentation, and ideological regulation. Notably, the comparison exposes the contradictory nature of the discourse of “not enoughness”. Hence, this calls for women to aim for the sky yet remain grounded, to be independent yet self-sacrificing. It ensures continuous self-evaluation and internalised doubt. Such discursive instability produces compliant subjects who regulate their own aspirations in anticipation of social judgment. Inadequacy thus becomes a form of self-regulation implanted within everyday life.

In the socio-cultural context, the inadequacy discourse is further complicated by the influence of caste, colour, communal norms, and capitalism. Concurrently, it is a time for women to negotiate respect at domestic, educational, and occupational fronts. Empowerment discourse itself may also be implicated in the reproduction of conditional approval, where women’s successes are only celebrated if they remain socially acceptable. Such a fluid standard of adequacy emerges from the study. ‘Inadequacy’ as a form of discourse contributes towards interdisciplinary feminist theory, encouraging scholars and stakeholders to consider how linguistic, representational, and institutional practices continue to reproduce patriarchal power dynamics. It evokes the prerequisite for modernistic discourses in pedagogy, literature, and the place of work that encourage extensive and wholesome definitions of womanhood. The dogma of “not enoughness” will require not only symbolic inclusiveness but also transformational change in the construction of value, competence, and legitimacy. It is only by sabotaging cultural narratives

that justify women's inferiority that more balanced notions of subjectivity and participation can be initiated.

References

- Adichie, C. N. (2014). *We should all be feminists*. Anchor Books.
- Beauvoir, S. de. (2011). *The Second Sex*, translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier. Vintage Books. (Original work published 1949)
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
- Hooks, B. (1981). *Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism*. South End Press.
<https://hamtramckfreeschool.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/hooks-bell-aint-i-a-woman-black-woman-and-feminism.pdf>
- Morrison, T. (1970). *The Bluest Eye*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Woolf, V. (1929). *A room of one's own*. Hogarth Press.



'Pinjar' - The Caged Skeleton: Shame, Silence, and Survival

Debanjana Banerjee

Guest Lecturer

Department of English

Narasinha Dutt College

Howrah, West Bengal, India.

Email: debanjanabanerjee2001@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* as an unrefined critique of violence and trauma inflicted on women during the Partition of India. The term 'Pinjar' translates to both "skeleton" and "cage", and serves as a symbol of the emotional void and societal entrapment women experienced. Through the characters of Pooro, Lajo, and the Sakkar madwoman, the novel uncovers the trauma of abduction and lost identities. Honour, shame, and silence intertwined, exacerbate and weaponise women, casting them as the targets of communal retribution, and uprooting them both physically and psychologically. Pooro's new, imposed identity as Hamida erases her previous self, yet she still manages to find agency. Rashid, at the core of the story, is not a black-and-white character; he is part of that which he condemns, torn between conflicting loyalties and the pull of tradition. From an ecofeminist standpoint, we see how violence against women and nature comes from the same place: male pride, revenge, and self-interest. If Pooro being abducted by Rashid to take revenge for their previous family conflicts is unacceptable, Pooro's brother, Trilok, setting Rashid's crops on fire to take revenge for his sister's abduction is equally wrong. Both women and nature are being objectified here as mere weapons to settle scores and satisfy the male ego. In the end, *Pinjar* presents to us how patriarchy and communalism reinforce each other, which in turn marks women as the primary victims -- yet it does not totally break their spirit or report their small yet real acts of resistance.

Keywords: Gendered violence, Psychological trauma, Partition violence, Loss of Identity, Ecofeminism.



Received: 30.04.2026

Accepted: 04.06.2026

Published: 15.06.2026

CJHSSC, Volume: 2

Issue: 1, June 2026

Page: 35 - 43

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20648011>

Copyright: Author © 2026



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Published by: Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College,
Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

Available at: www.ssjalangirlscollege.org.in/journal.php

Email: confluence.ssjgc@gmail.com

Introduction

Splitting India in 1947 brought pain that few could forget. Wounds stayed open, bleeding long after the borders were drawn. Apart from dividing countries, it also affected personal relationships and identity. Under such circumstances, the world becomes chaotic and quiet, allowing literature to work as an outlet for everything unsaid. This paper provides a close reading of one of Amrita Pritam's most significant works, *Pinjar*. It focuses on describing the inhumane effects of partition, particularly on women, which can be broadly associated with emptiness and confusion.

Unlike most stories, *Pinjar* drops the readers into disorder, where nothing holds steady, and everything seems strange. The name itself, *Pinjar*, happens to mean skeleton or cage, quietly shaping how one sees what unfolds inside its pages. First, it describes a state when one experiences inner emptiness and feels hollowed out or boxed in. Secondly, identity becomes a rather fluid entity here. Where other partition literature like Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, and Saadat Hasan Manto's *Toba Tek Singh* provide dark images of the partition violence, like forceful migration and communal violence, Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* focuses mainly on the sufferings of women due to the partition.

Pinjar portrays the blurring of borders between the private and public spheres as well as between individual stories and the tragedy of the entire nation. However, *Pinjar* is more than a mere historical narrative. It does not speak of a lone sufferer but the entire women's race who were the victims of the partition violence. The plot is deeply rooted in true historical events. *Pinjar* unfolds less as a plot and more through moments unmoored. How easily identity slips when home becomes something unfamiliar and lost. Not tragedy driving it - just absence, widening slowly. A self, once displaced, does not snap back. Instead, it learns new edges. The ground beneath shifts without warning. Then comes the hush where old names mean nothing. This hollowing out? That too has weight.

Pooro, the protagonist, gradually starts to suffer from Trauma Bonding (Stockholm Syndrome). After her abduction, she was initially locked up in a small house in the isolated fields outside her village, Chatto. As her parents refused to accept her back due to the shame that the abduction carried with it, she was left with no other option but to marry and stay with Rashid forever. The isolated victim's survival instinct compelled her to form an emotional attachment to her abuser. Pooro adapted this coping mechanism and eventually accepted her fate and new life.

Survival sits at the heart of *Pinjar*, though it arrives quietly, through sorrow rather than speeches. The plot moves like memory - uneven, haunted. When identity crumbles, what actually remains? A person can lose home, name, even voice - and still breathe. That breathing becomes its own kind of question. Meaning clings to small acts, not grand choices. Pain shapes truth more than triumph does. What stays after loss? Not courage exactly. Maybe survival instinct.

***Pinjar* – Hollow like a Skeleton, Confined like a Cage**

The word 'Pinjar' itself encapsulates the whole meaning of the novel. The women in this work survived Partition, having nothing left within themselves. Pooro is the main character, but the fate that awaits her is far from easy. She was kidnapped by Rashid and had to change herself into a new person known only as 'Hamida'. However, the poor woman was not simply trapped in this way: Pooro tried and tried to escape, but the way back was always barred to her. Should she escape to some distant place, the shame would still follow, blocking any chance at a normal life. So Pooro remained by Rashid's side - no affection there, only necessity holding her close.

In the case of Lajo, Pooro's sister-in-law, the caged feeling appears somewhat differently. She was abducted from the crowd of Hindus moving to India during the Partition riots. Her abduction was not out of revenge. It was merely to enjoy the female body. Out of her normal, happy life, she was suddenly pulled into the life of exploitation, confinement, and shame. Pooro and Rashid somehow managed to drag her out later. She walked home again. Nevertheless, chains stayed - no ropes, just the weight of the trauma. She was denied her previous life, maybe by herself. Shame moved with her, step for step. And there is the madwoman, wandering around in Sakkar, nameless. All she has lost includes herself, as well. She is the extreme version of all three—the lowest point—having lost even her sense of self. And yet, she too is confined by what has been done to her, unable to get out of her misery.

These three women, Pooro, Lajo, and the madwoman, reflect the true meaning of 'Pinjar'. They are living beings who have been reduced to surviving within the confines of custom, memory, and misery.

Women as the Primary Sufferers

From the outset, *Pinjar* plunges the readers right into the horrors of Partition. For example, when Rashid abducts Pooro, the act is not just a tragedy but an indicator of how women's bodies become battlegrounds where one community tries to get its revenge on another. However, the

abduction is not just an individual incident but part of a much larger horror that many suffered through, and 'honour' became the pretext for all that evil. There is also Pooro's loss of identity after her abduction; renamed Hamida, she is denied a voice both literally and metaphorically since she cannot speak up anymore about what has happened to her. She loses even her own consciousness, unable to identify herself anymore – a fate of so many other women who disappear into oblivion.

Quiet moments often carry the deepest weight. She walks away, then returns, hoping things might be different now. This time, though, it is not some unknown face that shuts the door - her own blood does. The house stays closed. Her kin become strangers. It seems that her family prefers to value their reputation rather than love and compassion. And, like Pooro, Lajo also falls victim to abduction, although hers happened during the riots, and then she was returned home later. Her body bears visible marks of what happened to her, but she is never again able to re-assimilate into society mentally. 'Honour' in this culture is rather arbitrary: one woman is accepted into society while another is ostracised.

However, this novel is not all about being a victim. Pooro does a remarkable thing for Lajo and helps her get away from her abductor, letting compassion triumph over embarrassment despite the fact that there could have been no judgment from anyone on her part. Even though Pritam's female characters suffer greatly, they do fight back, although the way they try to overcome their difficulties is not as drastic. People have created shame and thrown it upon the shoulders of those who have already suffered. Pooro has not committed any crime; nevertheless, she suffers from others' judgments and opinions. Shame becomes a terrible creature and prevails over blood ties. This is what causes the collapse of all relationships: Pooro becomes estranged from her family, her fiancé, and anyone she had once trusted. There are some glimpses of humanity—in Rashid's bizarre but caring treatment of her—but generally, compassion is overwhelmed by fear.

The novel makes it clear that Partition was not just about uprooted bodies or lost homes for women; it was also about being deprived of everything else—family, dignity, self-respect, even the freedom to choose one's suffering. Women were affected most not because violence was directed at them individually, but because they became prizes in sickening games of cruelty. Although other partition literature like Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Saadat Hasan Manto's *Khol Do (Open It)*, and Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* presents the gendered violence as a part of the partition horror, Pritam's *Pinjar* provides a deeper dive into the

psychological realm of the characters. Pooro adapts Trauma Bonding (Stockholm Syndrome) as she has no one to call her own but her abductor, Rashid. Her source of wound and healing becomes one. On the other hand, Rashid suffers from Coerced Guilt as he was forced to abduct Pooro due to the pressure from his community. Throughout his life, he let Pooro take an upper hand as he was fully engrossed in guilt.

Trauma of Abduction and Loss of Identity

However, *Pinjar* leaves no place to ignore the impact that the Partition had on women's identity and psyche. Pooro, displaced from her birthplace, loses not just her village and parents, but her very identity. Although branded as 'spoiled', she has never done anything to deserve this label. Being compelled to adopt a new name, 'Hamida', by literally having ink put on her skin, she loses her identity completely. Every movement in Pooro's life turns into a struggle against erasure. On the one hand, she tries to reject this new existence but succumbs to circumstances and is unable to do so. In a way, she is neither Pooro nor Hamida but somewhere between the two. Pooro is just one of those thousands of women who were deprived of their identity during the Partition. Their destinies have been changed against their will, their identities being ruined, forgotten, or used to hurt them. Pooro's images reveal the destruction process through which a traumatised individual passes. Pooro is disapproved of by her protective family, is given another identity, and loses the core of herself.

There is a particular scene that embodies the essence of all the brutality. The refugees are streaming out of Pakistan, and Pooro is given an option to return home. Out of his past regret, Rashid pushes her forward. Still, escape is not real when the door was locked long before she turned around. Out of nowhere, she said no - that choice carved a line in stone. Not surrendering defines her now, even when the world leans hard on hopelessness, yet especially when defiance sparks alive. In the end, she decides to save others from a similar fate by staying back and helping other poor women.

Rashid, the Passive Victim

Although initially, Rashid seems like the bad one, things are not so clear-cut with him. He takes Pooro away, true. But hatred is not what drives him. His reasons run deeper than dislike. He has been entangled in a family conflict since birth and is attempting to "repair" an honour that has been badly harmed. As one may notice, customs enslave men as well; he conforms to the strategy simply because he should. When he kidnaps Pooro, one may observe how Rashid

deteriorates. Nowhere near cruel, he hesitates, holds back, yet still does nothing. Instead of striking out, he stumbles through clumsy comfort to fix his wrongs. When Pooro runs off, and her kin turn their backs, joy does not rise - he just lets it settle. Society makes her return to him the sole option.

Later in the narrative, Rashid transforms into a gentleman. Pooro moves freely, though grief lingers close behind. He wants safety for her, yet sees how his presence locks the door. Space remains between what he offers and what she has lost. His care holds weight, but so does confinement. Pooro begins saving kidnapped females while Rashid endorses the venture, even if it puts them at risk. When finally, there is no stopping Pooro from leaving if she wishes to, Rashid does not plead with her to stay. This is his gift to her, his opportunity to offer her the same freedom that was never available to him. It is an austere love, if love can be called thus – sorrowful, tender, remorseful.

Rashid, after abducting Pooro due to his communal pressure, develops a Coerced Guilt. He slips into a state of psychological distress as he feels guilty for the crime he had to commit, not wilfully but due to external pressure. He remains a passive companion in the marriage and lets Pooro take the upper hand, although she is also not very comfortable in the marriage. Distance prevails between them, restricting them from enjoying a normal life. Rashid does not invite hate, nor praise. Shaped by times long gone, he sifts through ruins built by others who share his blood but not his guilt. His presence in *Pinjar* suggests how systems trap even those who did not design them; sometimes mercy fails to balance what was done in silence or claimed on one's behalf.

Ultimately, *Pinjar* leaves the readers with a message – violence, honour, and shame are illusions. To the women who bear the brunt of the pain, mere survival becomes the greatest feat. However, occasionally, rarely, merely choosing one's fate is sufficient heroism in its own right.

Ecofeminism—Women and Crops Caught in the Fire of Male Rage

From soil to skin, control runs deep where women and earth are treated the same. Power shapes both lives when one rules over all. Men decide what grows, who speaks for the trees - or the mothers. A system built high on exclusion pulls threads tight between body and land. Both women and land are treated as objects that men feel entitled to possess, control, dominate, and even harm if their pride gets hurt in some way. As shown in *Pinjar*, Trilok, the brother of Pooro, burns Rashid's crop land as an act of vengeance. It is not only a symbolic and rhetorical action. Women and crops receive the exact treatment – possession, cultivation, and destruction in times of men's anger.

Pinjar was written during the Partition of India, which is characterised by violence, among other things, and an extremely patriarchal ideology. The bodies of women become a means of proving the honour of men. Land becomes the extension of men's ego as much as women do. The abduction of Pooro by Rashid is perceived as a shame upon Pooro's family. Without any further thought or discussion, Trilok starts burning Rashid's lands. It is not only about the financial damage but also about rivalry and power among men.

From an ecofeminist perspective, it is evident that patriarchal rage shatters humanity and the environment. Pooro does not have any control over her own life. Instead, she is perceived as a possession that can be returned and even disposed of according to the preferences of men in terms of their honour. Just like Pooro and women in general, living entities such as crops are also sacrificed for the sake of satisfying male vanity. Destroying crops through burning them is not only a form of revenge, but also breaks the bond between humans and Mother Earth. Farming usually means caring for soil, working alongside nature, then feeding it gently. Yet here, that rhythm twists - suddenly harsh, quietly violent. Thus, the destruction of crops symbolises Pooro's dislocation and loss of identity. Ecofeminism argues that such forms of abuse are linked and result from similar mindsets.

The author not only outlines the outcomes of the revenge but also points to its inherent destructive nature as well. The story illustrates how the egocentric violence continues to repeat, destroying not only individuals but also the surrounding reality. The moment when Pooro starts to understand compassion and virtue is when Pritam seems to imply something positive, which coincides with what ecofeminism stands for. As Françoise d'Eaubonne, the French feminist thinker, says in her work, *Le Féminisme ou la mort* (translated into English as *Feminism or Death*), the survival of the planet and the liberation of women are interconnected, as both are controlled by the same patriarchal forces. She also advocated for a revolution led by women to dismantle the patriarchal control structures. Here, in *Pinjar*, Pooro, Lajo, and the other women are exploited as much as the agricultural land, in the hands of patriarchy. When Pooro's intention to save the other women becomes a fulfilled action, the circle of ecofeminism becomes complete. Pooro, although a sufferer herself, gathers the courage to help other victims. This act of hers brings a revolution in the patriarchal structure, where male ego and family pride were based on the exploitation of women and nature.

Conclusion

Pinjar tells a raw story about the damage caused by Partition, especially how it hurt women. They seem to be mere bodies without souls. Pooro, Lajo, the woman driven mad, trapped not just by men's rules, but also hatred between communities, and distorted ideas of dignity. In addition to being subjected to violence during Partition, the novel shows how the shame and silence that surround their experiences contribute to their marginalisation, even when their bodies are physically safe once more. The trauma they received will never be erased. Their lives will never be the same again. Once the damage is done, it can never be undone. Rashid complicates the narrative as he is not merely the man who abducts Pooro. Caught in a loop of vengeance and pride, Rashid follows the path the story itself condemns. Now and then, those who suffer blur into those who harm. Rashid, being influenced by a sense of communal revenge and false pride, not only destroys the lives of Pooro and her family but also his own life as well. Struck by guilt, he leads a life that is neither carefree nor normal. He unknowingly becomes the passive sufferer, Pooro being the active. They failed to have a normal marital life. While Pooro's life was filled with hatred, Rashid's was filled with repentance.

Hope survives, even when everything burns down around it. Though *Pinjar* centres on Partition, its real target shines through - the systems turning women into objects, erasing who they are. Pritam walks out of ruin, not unscarred, yet carrying something quiet but steady. Pooro's actions, although heartbreaking, reflect the careful decision-making process she employs in order to seek out small opportunities for humanity in her cage.

References

- Pritam, A. (2009). *Pinjar: The skeleton and other stories* (K. Singh, Trans.). Tara Press.
- Singh, K. (1956). *Train to Pakistan*. Grove Press.
- Manto, S. H. (1987). "Toba Tek Singh." In *Kingdom's end and other stories* (K. A. Beig, Trans.). Sterling Publishers.
- Manto, S. H. (1987). "Khol do (Open it)." In *Kingdom's end and other stories* (K. A. Beig, Trans.). Sterling Publishers.
- Manto, S. H. (1987). "Toba Tek Singh." In *Kingdom's end and other stories* (K. A. Beig, Trans.). Sterling Publishers.

- Poudel, B. P. (2025). *Indelible marks of violence in Amrita Pritam's Pinjar*. BMC Research Journal, 4(1), 16–27.
- Butalia, U. (1998). *The other side of silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. Duke University Press.
- Menon, R., & Bhasin, K. (1998). *Borders and boundaries: Women in India's Partition*. Rutgers University Press.
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma and the possibility of history*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- d'Eaubonne, F. (2022). *Feminism or death* (R. A. Hottell, Trans. & Ed.). Verso.



Coherence amid Contrasts and Contradictions in Nature: Busting the Anthropocentric View of Ecology in English Poetry

Dr. Kanak Kanti Bera

Associate Professor

Department of English

Panskura Banamali College (autonomous),

Panskura R.S., West Bengal, India.

&

Guest Lecturer

Department of Linguistics

University of Calcutta, Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

Email: kanakkbera@gmail.com

Abstract

Though Ecocriticism has emerged as a philosophical perspective only in the late 20th century and started being applied to literary study very recently, literary artists in great numbers have expressed their environmental concerns since the very beginning of literature itself. Lyric poetry is one of the oldest literary genres and is better known for its imaginative and musical qualities. But, besides its high amount of subjectivity, it can even reflect on the issues relating to Nature and the environment, as well as the growing complexity in the relationship between man and Nature. Poets have never failed to realize that material progress and ecological health can hardly have any permanent truce, that ecological integrity (Peterson, 2000; Pimental, 2000), which consists of both coherence and contradictions, is growingly endangered only with human interventions. Especially with the English romantic poets, the process of disseminating eco-consciousness got initiated in serious notes, and later on started gathering further momentum in the twentieth century beyond the geographical boundary. These poets formulated some original and innovative ways of understanding the world and its environment. Taking up a number of lyrics collected from across different cultures, and applying the ecocritical perspective to the textual analysis, this paper investigates the original and individualistic approaches adopted by the poets in viewing Nature and the environment. The article has examined the select lyrics that evince the potential for inspiring a deep 'ecological' understanding and formation of a modern ecological worldview in the Western and American intellectual traditions.

Keywords: English poetry, Nature, ecological integrity, Ecocriticism, anthropocentrism.



Received: 12.04.2026

Accepted: 02.06.2026

Published: 15.06.2026

CJHSSC, Volume: 2

Issue: 1, June 2026

Page: 44 - 61

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20667971>

Copyright: Author © 2026



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Published by: Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College,
Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

Available at: www.ssjalangirlscollege.org.in/journal.php

Email: confluence.ssjgc@gmail.com

1. Introduction

This Nature and environment came into being on this planet much before humans. But very soon, with the arrival of the human species and with the gradual progress of their civilization, man started dominating not only the whole of the world, Nature, the environment, but also the other living creatures. Today, it has eventually brought the planet very close to its destruction because of this relentless exploitation by humans. Lynen (1960) deftly elaborated on this:

“Man’s physical needs, the dangers facing him, the realities of birth and death, the limits of his ability to know and to act are shown in stark outline by the indifference and inaccessibility of the physical world in which he must live.” (p. 150)

The question arose amidst all this: does the human have the exclusive right to this world, its Nature and environment? The natural answer is a big ‘NO’. There emerged a group of philosophers who started questioning human supremacy and their right to almost everything on this earth. Literary artists, the playwrights, poets, and prose writers often took up these philosophical assumptions to offer fresh insights into man’s relationship to Nature and environment. The present paper makes an analysis of a handful of lyric poems written in English to explore their ecocritical contents and ideas, as envisaged in some select poets across different countries.

2. Research problem

By virtue of its high degree of reflectivity and deep philosophical insights, poetry never fails to represent the quintessential bond between man and Nature. Lyric poetry is one of the oldest literary genres, and is better known for its imaginative and musical qualities. However, it can depict a comprehensive picture of the gradual evolution and growing complexity of this relationship.

While the older generation of nature poets mostly hinged upon the heyday of man’s tryst with Nature, later schools of poetry have often expressed concerns over the environmental crises, and over-exploitation of natural resources. With all seriousness, the English Romantic poets initiated a process of disseminating eco-consciousness. Later on, this poetic voice started gathering further momentum in the twentieth century, not only in England but beyond any geographical

boundary. In their original and innovative ways, the later generation of poets formulated some understanding of the world and its environment. This paper intends to investigate the original and individualistic approaches of these poets adopted to express their views on Nature and the environment. Making a selection of poetic pieces from across different cultures, the paper has examined these insightful lyrics that evince the potential for inspiring a deep ‘ecological’ understanding and formation of a modern ecological worldview in the Western and American intellectual traditions.

3. Scope, Objective, and Research Questions

The scope of the paper is confined to ten select lyrical poems written in English across different countries and cultures (q.v. the next section, §5. Methodology).

As regards the theoretical perspective, the core ecocritical notions, such as, dialogue between man and Nature, dangers of human progress, presumptions of civilization posing a threat to ecology¹, the powers of Nature working for coherence, retrieval and regeneration in spite of the inherent contrasts and contradictions², as propagated by the theorists like Patrick D. Murphy (2009), William Rueckert (1996), Lawrence Buell (1995, 2005), Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (1996), David Mazel (2000) and others have been applied to our discussion and analysis.

The primary objective here is to examine how the British and American poets belonging to different generations have reacted in their poetry against the growing threats to our environment. The paper intends to throw some insightful light on the philosophy about the ecological aspects as reflected in these select pieces. The specific questions that have been addressed include:

- i. How do the poets’ attitude to Nature and environment go beyond the circuit of simple nature study by virtue of the strong ethical aspect of it?
- ii. What is the poets’ attitude to the inherent contradictions and coherences in Nature?
- iii. How do they reflect on man’s relationship with the nonhuman world?
- iv. Does the ecocritical philosophy in poetry differ in any way cross-culturally?

4. Methodology

The following lyrics have been used as the primary study materials, and critically analysed from the ecocritical perspective:

I. British poetry

William Blake (1757-1827):	“London”
William Wordsworth (1770-1850):	“The World is too much with us” “The Reverie of Poor Susan”
John Keats (1795-1821):	“On Fame”
Thomas Hardy (1840-1928):	“The Darkling Thrush”
Louis MacNeice (1907-1963):	“Snow”

II. American poetry

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882):	“Water”
Robert Frost (1874-1963):	“The Road Not Taken” “Mending Wall”
Tupac Amaru Shakur (1971-1996):	“The rose that grew from concrete.”

4.1 Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism can be looked upon as an awareness of or protest against man’s anthropocentric sense of domination over the earth, the environment, and Nature. Ecocriticism is far more than nature study. It is unique in itself by virtue of its ethical commitment to the world of Nature and the nonhuman.

Among the eco-critics, there is a persistent realization of the fact that humans are never the most significant entity in the universe. The Nature, the environment, or the whole world should never be regarded or interpreted in terms of human values and experiences.

Though its roots can be found in the late 1970’s³, Ecocriticism as an academic discipline has its formal beginning in the 1990’s.

4.1.1 Ecocriticism and literary study

Literary artists in great numbers have expressed their environmental concerns since the very beginning of literature itself. However, ecological consciousness, with all its scientific and philosophical imports, got to have its momentum only in the late 20th century. As a natural development of the thought, the ecocritical perspective as a philosophical or analytical tool for the study of literature has started being adopted and applied to literary study very recently.

How does this theoretical framework work in literary study, and what exactly comes under its aegis? According to Rueckert², Ecocriticism applies ecology or ecological principles into the

study of literature. Lawrence Buell defines Ecocriticism “as a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalists’ praxis” (*The Environmental Imagination*, p. 430). Patrick D. Murphy thought, Ecocriticism “arises from and is oriented toward a concern with human and nonhuman interaction and interrelationship”. In Glotfelty and Fromm, Ecocriticism has been defined as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”. Ecocritical study of literature is, in fact, bound to be a distinct form of literary activism. David Mazel (2000) opined that it becomes Ecocriticism when, in some literary discourse and analysis, “nature mattered.” Ecocritical study makes a given literary treatise much larger than a mere exploration of the beauties of Nature; it can happen with a serious understanding of the man-environment bond, the possible dangers to it, and remedies.

5. Textual Analysis

The select British and American poets have expressed their prompt realization that material progress and ecological health can hardly have any permanent truce, that ecological integrity (Peterson, 2000; Pimental, 2000), consisting of both coherence and contradictions, is growingly endangered with human interventions.

As a theoretical tool applied to literary study, Ecocriticism primarily addresses the man-nature relationship. In expressing their love for Nature, the English Romantic poets have explored various shades of man-nature relations and problematic human interferences resulting in an increasing crisis in ecology. In fact, for the first time ever in English literature, urban ecology assumed a significant role in the field of Ecocriticism.

5.1 Blake

Blake’s “London” is a critique of modern civilization as opposed to Nature, and a critique of, in the words of Tallmadge (2004), “the consequent ugliness, impoverishment, and filth” of the modern European cities (p. 41). In the poem, Blake lamented the loss of the pristine beauties of Nature in the urban metropolis. The inevitable conflict between material progress and Nature not only leads to ecological imbalance but also human suffering and moral bankruptcy. On one hand, the image of “charter’d Thames” reflects the urbanity-induced loss of natural beauty; on the other hand, the images of weak “face”, crying “infants”, blackened “Chimney-sweepers”, sighing “soldiers,” and so on create a true picture of the “mind-forg’d manacles”. There is hardly any romance left in the affairs of “Marriage hearse” or any festivity over the arrival of

“new-born Infants”. The whole of the urban reality can be captured through the implications of the image of “youthful Harlots”.

Blake's presentation of the city of London is an example of “urban nature”; the epigram is to remind us that modern metropolitan cities are “governed by ecological relations extending in space and time, invisible in themselves yet revealed by the presence, persistence, and behavior of resident organisms” (Tallmadge 2004, pp. 36, 45).

5.2 Wordsworth

Apparently, “The world is too much with us” centres upon a civilization-induced contrast between the natural world and the urbanized human world characterized by industrialization and materialism. It seems to be a harsh critique of the industrial revolution that brought prosperity, but at the cost of man’s close relation to Nature. It is a poetic censure of the futility of material and scientific progress in the 19th century that, ironically, as the poet saw it, separated man from Nature and environment:

“Little we see in Nature that is ours;

We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!” (ll.3-4)

The poet desperately expressed his longing for the pagan days with Nature in its pristine glory:

“Great God! I’d rather be

A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn” (ll.9-10)

But the question is: does this pro-nature stance of Wordsworth make him essentially anti-urban?

While the anti-urban sentiment prevails all over Blake’s “London” that abounds in the sense of oppression and despair, Wordsworth is not stringent in his indictments of the metropole. Rather, the romantics like Wordsworth visualized the whole scheme of Nature in a way that goes beyond the straightforward urban-rural binarity, *i.e.*, life among the rural beauties ensures sustenance, whereas city life alienates. His “The world is too much with us” is more than about the paganism-modernism contrast, or “Reverie of Poor Susan” is more than about the city-village contrast. The contrast and conflicts are there essentially, but Wordsworth, with his deeper poetic vision, has uplifted the apparent reality into something mystical. In his nature poems, “Neither man nor nature are opposed. Nor are they one. Both are related to a fuller context that includes them”

(Danby 49). The supreme coherence that binds all together, ‘mountain’, ‘trees’, ‘river’, Susan, the village girl, and the city maid, the Thrush, its song, Lothbury and Wood Street in London, essentially discards any kind of polarization where one end is magnified at the cost of the other. The thrush regales her heart all the way, in the ‘vale of Cheapside’, on its ‘green pastures’, or in the London Street. At the supreme moment of realizing the coherence among all the physical contrasts, the London girl dissolves into an eternal reality of peace, serenity, and beauty. Susan is in London physically, but spiritually she is everywhere, in every beautiful aspect, getting dissolved into the wholeness of Nature’s coherence:

“She looks, and her heart is in heaven: but they fade,

The mist and the river, the hill and the shade:

The stream will not flow, and the hill will not rise,

And the colours have all passed away from her eyes!” (ll. 13-16)

Urbanity could not kill the spirit to perceive the beauty, rather it inspires the vision. That is why Kate Rigby (2004) talked about “endorsement of urbanity” (p. 253) by Wordsworth by virtue of an “urban topography of the sacred” (p. 256). Such dialogues between the human mind and the natural world that the poem “The Table Turned” talks about constitute this supreme coherence. When some ecocritics raised questions about Wordsworth’s ecological sensibilities, Hartman (1970) defended him on the grounds that his attitude to Nature has an ethical aspect to it. On one hand, Wordsworth, with his poetic vision, advocated a healthy coexistence of man and Nature. On the other hand, he accords equal rights to every living being or non-living object and busted the anthropocentric view of the universe.

5.3 Keats

In “On Fame”, Keats harshly criticized man’s sense of supremacy not only over Nature but also over fellow beings. Man exploited everything around in order to attain name and fame, commonly associated with the modern idea of progress. While Blake and Wordsworth showed man’s material prosperity alienating him from Nature, in Keats, it is the anthropocentric goals at the subjective level that trigger the rift.

The contrast between the world of Nature and man’s world has been beautifully depicted by the core question:

“... the rose leaves herself upon the briar,
For winds to kiss and grateful bees to feed,
And the ripe plum still wears its dim attire,
The undisturbed lake has crystal space;
Why then should man, teasing the world for grace,
Spoil his salvation for a fierce miscreed? (ll. 9-14)

5.4 Hardy

In Hardy’s “The Darkling Thrush,” the bird, “an aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small/ In blast-beruffled plume,” stands for Nature with all its apparent contradictions. Hardy carefully created the evening setting and put the bird there as an integral part of Nature. The images like ‘spectre gray’, ‘dregs’, ‘broken lyres’ convey the bleak reality about this world that is pessimistic and dark. Being plunged into his utmost sadness, like the thrush, the poet initially felt to be perfectly integrated into this lifeless nature’s shrunken, hard and dry’. This feeling might be a product of Hardy’s narcissistic faith in the notions of deep ecology⁴. He started feeling that, as he was down with his melancholy and sadness, so must Nature be; Nature is to serve only human purposes.

However, toward the end, when he was quite overwhelmed by the happy notes of the bird, the essential coherence in Nature, despite apparent contradiction, dawned upon him.

“....a voice arose among
The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-hearted evensong
Of joy illimited.” (ll. 17-20)

The bird’s “a full-hearted” evening song “of joy unlimited” came as a huge contrast with the prevailing ambience and surprised the poet. On one hand, the bird provides a contrast to the Nature all around, on the other, the bird presents a contrast between his gaunt, blast-beruffled physique and full-hearted song. The song made the poet realize the hollowness of his anthropocentric view on Nature that (mis)guided him to be rhetorical through his deployment of pathetic fallacy. Nature’s course must be working in its own terms, irrespective of the dreams, desires, or purposes of man. The phrase ‘a full-hearted evensong’ indicates that the integration in spite of apparent contrasts is all spontaneous rather than imposed, redundant, or decorative. On

hearing the song, Hardy felt even more despondent over his sense of alienation, realizing his inability to integrate:

“there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.” (ll. 29-32)

The bird’s magical voice, “Of such ecstatic sound/ was written on terrestrial things,” reminded the poet who plays the role of an objective observer and commentator that man’s over-thinking or over-philosophising of rational Nature made him an alien to the core requirements of Nature. No matter whether man exists or not, he is present or absent in the ecological system—it absolutely makes no difference to Nature. Man himself has created this insignificant and valueless position for himself with his desire to be the dictator and arbiter of everything. The poet, though a knowledgeable man, though a seer and observer, cannot make any sense of the “blessed Hope”, because as a byproduct of his sense of superiority, he can decipher the meaning of “Hope” according to his own definitions only. He felt himself miserably alone, because one feels so when one fails to understand and value one's nonhuman relations, as Sharma (2017) has observed.

5.5 MacNeice

Based on the reality of inter-species contrast that is conducive for natural coherence, “Snow” reveals the opulence, abundance, and possibilities and impossibilities in Nature that make it ‘rich’ but mysterious. It is an ironic commentary on how man, preoccupied with his sensuous enjoyment of the apparent natural beauties and bliss all around, often fails to get integrated into the mysterious but harmonious world of Nature. Nature abounds in contrasts: Nature can destroy and can regenerate, can attract or repel, can regale or surprise you. All these contradictions and binaries make the coherence even more mysterious for man:

“World is suddener than we fancy it.
World is crazier and more of it than we think,
Incorrigibly plural.” (ll. 5-7)

The ‘Collateral’ existence of the ‘incompatible’ and contrasts (natural contrasts) is the reality that man often misses, since we lack the vision and insights. When the rest of Nature is mysteriously rich, and more than we feel it, man (who is a part of this Nature too), with all his limitations of knowledge, naiveties, and faltering, constitutes a further inter-species contrast.

5.6 Emerson

In his “Water,” Emerson took up the issue of intra-species contrast represented by the primeval natural element ‘water’ to remind us of the ambiguous force of Nature. The contrast is inherent in the natural forces water can exert, because it may be both benevolent and destructive to us. Nevertheless, this dual Nature is never arbitrary; rather, it depends on man’s attitude to it. Without any human intervention, water helps man in his struggle for survival and sustenance; it treats man “prettily” and “wittily”. But as soon as man starts manipulating the natural resource injudiciously and unethically, water must avenge this misdeed upon man, “it will destroy”:

“Well used, it decketh joy,

Adorneth, doubleth joy:

Ill used, it will destroy.” (ll. 7-9)

The irony man is confronted with in his relation to water (standing for Nature itself) is that, while man brags of his domination over Nature, actually, man is at the mercy of natural forces every time for his existence. The sooner we realize that Nature is more inclusive, the better for civilization. Probably man himself is ignorant of the way civilization can have its heyday, but

“The water understands

Civilization well.” (ll. 1-2)

When nature ‘wets’ and ‘chills’, it is actually a call for man to have a stronger bond and integration with Nature. But man either fails to learn the fact or ignores the lesson willfully, thereby courting his own misfortune.

The supreme harmony and coherence in the natural world, in spite of the apparent contrasts, contradictions, and ambiguities (*e.g.*, water can sustain as well as destroy), is a standing invitation for man, who is also an essential part of the whole, to integrate:

“It is not disconcerted,

It is not broken-hearted.” (ll. 5-6)

In this poem, Emerson emerges as a critic of materialism, and he tries to urge man to lead a simple life in harmony with Nature. He has truly established Nature as “the vehicle of thought”, which is, as Kern (1996) described, to say that Nature provides us with a medium, not only of word but of things, that gives us access to spirit or truth (p. 40).

Once man can discover the true meaning of Nature and man’s relation to it, he can find “self” in Nature, and can get united with it. In the words of Wyne (2010),

“A right relationship with Nature also means an understanding of the relation of the parts to the whole. It is the difference between seeing individual farms owned by individual men and seeing - the ‘landscape’. It is —the ‘poet’ who —can integrate all the parts” (p. 186)

5.7 Frost

Robert Frost busted the myth of an anthropocentric worldview in his treatment of Nature. He is a realist and environmentalist, who extensively depicted the New England rural pastoral scenery and wildlife expressed in his nature poetry. More importantly, his nature poetry beautifully expresses his philosophical realization that a healthy co-existence of man and ecology is the only way for both to sustain and thrive. Writing his poems set in the rural backdrop mainly, Frost pointed out the vehemence of natural forces, their domination over human enterprises, though man often thinks of it otherwise, being boastful of his civilization and its material progress. The poem, “Mending Wall,” starts with the same idea:

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,

That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,

And spills the upper boulders in the sun.” (ll. 1-3)

Though man believed raising a wall to be beneficial, as “good fences” to “make good neighbors”, natural forces always resist this. In the whole scheme of things, intra-species contrast

represented by the trees (“He is all pine and I am apple orchard”) seems to be a natural separation between two neighbours, which promotes harmony in the long run.

Frost’s neighbour, who seems to be a stronger contingent of the material camp, could not understand the essential requirements of Nature. But the poet could realize that erecting a wall is but doing an offence to man as well as Nature:

“Before I built a wall I’d ask to know

What I was walling in or walling out,

And to whom I was like to give offense.” (ll. 32-34)

Thus, the neighbor repeating his father’s words, “Good fences make good neighbors,” is a faithful representative of the societal indifference to Nature that always puts human needs above ecology.

In his poem, “The Road Not Taken”, he talked about Nature’s opulence, if not contrast. That man must integrate himself into the scheme of Nature and ecology for a peaceful co-existence is not an imposition or obligation. Rather, Nature always offers a number of alternatives, out of which man is free to choose the best one for himself. The poet, confronted with the bifurcated roads in the wood, made his choice happily:

“Then took the other, as just as fair,

And having perhaps the better claim,

Because it was grassy and wanted wear.” (ll. 6-8)

Nature has her offerings and resources everywhere in different forms, but Frost’s poem philosophizes that man must be judicious and moderate in using the resources to his optimal benefit:

“I kept the first for another day! . . .

I doubted if I should ever come back.” (ll. 13-14)

The final philosophical revelation about Frost's ecological consciousness here is that in the case of any ecological imbalances, it is only man who is responsible. Metaphorically, the poet pointed his finger against man's material greed and desire to dominate and 'possess':

"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference." (ll. 18-20)

This is how, in Frost's nature poetry, an ever-present ecological consciousness may serve as an inspiration for our civilization.

5.8 Shakur

The ecological cohesion is a product of the collateral existence of contradictions as much as of coherence. Like MacNeice or Frost, Shakur, in his "*The Rose That Grew from Concrete*," has deftly touched upon this aspect of Nature with the images of concrete and rose that represent a contrast chiefly induced by modern civilization and material progress. While MacNeice's "Snow" dwells upon natural images that represent inherent binaries, Shakur's are images in contrast more radically, one drawn from the human world (that is, 'concrete') and the other from Nature (that is, 'rose').

"Proving Nature's law is wrong it

learned to walk without having feet.

Funny it seems, but by keeping its dreams,

it learned to breathe fresh air.

Long live the rose that grew from concrete

when no one else ever cared. " (ll. 3-8)

Beauty proves to be more powerful than "nature's law", i.e., scientific rules of Nature or than the material human progress. Life is beautiful and, as long as it remains so, Nature promotes it, even going against its primordial laws about basic requirements like earth, air, and water. Human

enterprises have given birth to lifeless ‘concrete’ that can only threaten life and its beauty, but not annihilate it altogether.

The collateral existence of these contrastive objects implies the mighty forces of our ecology and environment working for reconstruction and regeneration despite the rampant human apathy.

6. Conclusion

This present study is an attempt to go beyond the oversimplified interpretation of nature poetry. For example, in Romantic poetry, the city is a locus of degeneration and corruption, as opposed to the rural and remote countryside. In Wordsworth’s “Michael”, city life is seen defiling Luke, who was originally a worshipper of idyllic Nature. However, the British romantics definitely did more than glorifying the idyllic rural beauties and denouncing cityscapes, as many critics working on the Romantic approach to ecology have made clear (Kroebar, 1994; Herford, 2003). The same kind of fallacy is there about the appreciation of American nature poetry. But, while criticizing the notions of Nature, wilderness, and modern man’s take on it in American culture, Tallmadge (2004) remarked that “Enshrining wilderness in distant places allows us to justify our abuse, neglect, or exploitation of local nature, which appears less worthy and so less heinous to victimize” (p. 41).

These fallacies arise largely from the shallow ecological perspective (it being essentially anthropocentric, putting man above everything) that prevailed over the practice of reading both British and American poetry. Only a deep ecological realization can recognize equal rights of every species, every organism, which can lead to a better understanding of Nature as well as nature poetry. This deep ecological perspective can lead to a better coherence and balance in the eco-system despite all apparent contrasts and contradictions. Man, as undoubtedly the most intelligent species on the earth, should have a better understanding of ecology. He must be responsible to himself, society, Nature and ecology. All the poets discussed above have conveyed in their own ways these very lessons. Understanding the ecology involves a deep understanding of the ecological contrasts and contradictions. Philosophically, the select poems have brushed over the facts that when the contrast is anthropocentric, where man is there to pose a threat to ecology, the problem is even more serious. In his “The End of Nature”, Bill Mackibben (1989) made a very significant comment on the danger (induced by man and his civilization) to Nature and ecology:

“Nature is not merely threatened by the possibility of apocalypse, but in some sense already beyond it, for if nature is inflected as wilderness, the very thought of human interference is enough decisively to contaminate its purity.”

(Mackibben, 1989, p. 106)

The regenerating and reproductive forces of ecology can very easily resolve the problems arising out of the inter-species or intra-species contrast (rather, they are the parts of the deeper coherence), but when it is not possible with the anthropocentric contrasts, the eco-system tries to ensure coherence and restore the balance, initially through resistance but finally through annihilation. For this restoration process, the inter-species or intra-species contrasts are the parts of the whole scheme: one aspect to exert the benevolent impact, but the other end to exert the malevolent force when necessary for restoration and regeneration (*e.g.*, Emerson’s water can both sustain and destroy, or MacNeice’s snow stands for death and rose for life and its beauty). Hardy, in his poem, fails to integrate into the apparent contrasts created by the ‘shrunk’ and ‘dry’ surroundings and the bird’s ‘full-throated even song’, because his anthropocentric ego misled him into the belief that such contrasts are incoherent. Boasting of his scientific knowledge and intelligence, man should not challenge the workings of nature but should work for a better ecological integrity (Peterson, 2000; Pimental, 2000). As Sharma (2017) rightly pointed out, man is never alone if he is aware of the nonhuman relationships that can integrate him into the deeper ecology.

The relevance of such a discussion on ecology and man’s role in the scheme can be felt much more if we compare and contrast our past and present. In the past, when men used to live in close contact with Nature, man’s eco-consciousness prevailed over the ego-consciousness. But presently, the tables have been turned with his ego, and the mad pursuit of possession and domination has brought the ecology as well as the whole world to the brink of destruction. In any form of environmental crisis, human culture and civilization have a vital role. The nature poets (and many others) have poetically conveyed to us the message that the ecosystem can function perfectly as long as our ethical system functions with sanity and judiciousness.

Notes:

¹ Etymologically, ‘ecology’ means ‘discourse on this earth’. ‘eco’, Gk *oikos*, means ‘earth + ‘logy’, Gk *logos* that means ‘logical discourse’.

² Contrasts and contradictions have been classified into 3 different types in this article:

- (i) Intra-species contrast (given that poetic imagination conceives of every nonhuman natural object or phenomenon as a part of a living system of ecology): When one particular nonhuman natural element has the contrastive qualities in itself, *e.g.*, ‘water’ that can nourish as well as destroy life;
- (ii) Inter-species contrast (given that poetic imagination conceives of every nonhuman natural object or phenomenon as a part of a living system of ecology): When two different natural elements will represent the contrastive forces/qualities, *e.g.*, ‘water’ that can nourish as well as destroy life;
- (iii) Anthropocentric contrast: When human society/civilization or man as a part of it would stand against the natural force out of a sheer sense of supremacy over the universe. As it is hinted, this contrast may be in the form of (a) individual-nature contrast or (b) civilization-nature contrast. The latter, *i.e.*, civilization-induced contrast, is seen when two worlds, ecology and human society/civilization, would be at war against each other.

³ In 1978, William Rueckert first coined the term ‘ecocriticism’ in his essay “Literature and Ecology:

An Experiment in Ecocriticism”).

⁴ ‘Deep ecology’ (Næss 1989) refuses to accept the domination of humans over Nature. Rather, every living being and natural object has an equal right to Nature. Everything under the sky has a right to live and flourish. Nature’s values are to be judged irrespective of its services to humanity. Deep ecology hardly welcomes climate change because it will adversely affect the living organisms and their well-being.

Standing against ecocentrism and biocentrism, ‘shallow ecology’ claims that the anthropocentric worldview is all justified, as man is superior in many respects. The value of Nature is only instrumental, to be judged in terms of how it serves human purposes. Climate change is not good, as humans may suffer the consequences of such changes.

Reference

Buell, Lawrence (1995). *The environmental imagination: Thoreau, Nature writing and the formation of American culture*. Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press.

- Buell, Lawrence (2005). *The future of environmental criticism: Environmental crisis and literary imagination*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Danby, John F. (2000). William Wordsworth: Poetry, Chemistry, Nature. In Laurence Coupe (Ed.), *The green studies reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 44-49.
- Glotfelty, Cheryll & Fromm, Harold (1996). *The ecocriticism reader: Landmarks in literary ecology*. The University of Georgia Press.
- Hartman, Geoffrey (1970). The Romance of Nature and the Negative Way. In Harold Bloom (Ed.), *Romanticism and consciousness*. New York: Norton, pp. 287-305.
- Herford, C. H. (2003). *The age of Wordsworth*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors.
- Kern, Robert (1996). *Orientalism, modernism and the American poem*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kroeber, Karl (1994). *Ecological literary criticism: Romantic imagining and the biology of the mind*. New York: Columbia UP.
- Lynen, John F. (1960). *The pastoral art of Robert Frost*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Mackibben, Bill (1989). *The end of Nature*. Random House.
- Mazel, David (2000). *American literary environmentalism*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Mishra, Sandip Kumar (2016). Ecocriticism: A Study of Environmental Issues in Literature.” *BRICS Journal of Educational Research*, 6(4), pp. 168-170.
- Murphy, Patrick D. (2009). *Ecocritical explorations in literary and cultural studies: Fences, boundaries, and fields*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Næss, Arne (1989). *Ecology, community and lifestyle: outline of an ecosophy*. Translated by D. Rothenberg. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.166-187.
- Peterson, G. (2000). Political ecology and ecological resilience: An integration of human and ecological dynamics. *Ecological Economics*, 35, pp. 323–336.
- Pimental, D., Westra, L., & Noss, R.F. (2000). *Ecological integrity: Integrating environment, conservation and health*. Washington DC: Island Press.

- Rigby, Kate (2004). *Topographies of the sacred: The Poetics of place in European Romanticism*. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia P.
- Rueckert, William (1996). Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism. In Glotfelty and Fromm (Ed.), *The ecocriticism reader: Landmarks in literary ecology*. The University of Georgia Press, pp.105-123.
- Sharma, Vipin K. (2017). Thoreau's Ecocriticism: An Improved Means to Unimproved Ends. *American Journal of Arts and Design*, 2(1), pp. 24-29.
- Tallmadge, John (2004). *The Cincinnati arch: Learning from Nature in the city*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Wyne, Tiffany K. (2010). *Critical companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson: A literary reference to his life and works*. USA: Facts On File Inc.



De-Romanticizing Wordsworth's Effigy of 'Nature' and 'Femininity' in *Tintern Abbey* and *Lucy Poems*: An Eco-Feminist Perspective

Shruti Dugar

Independent Researcher
Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

Email: ladnun13panthi@gmail.com

Abstract

Romanticism, as a poetic manoeuvre, has always been equated by literary scholars and associated intellectuals with the phrases, 'return to nature'; 'revival of the golden age'; 'willing suspension of disbelief'; and 'spontaneous overflow of powerful sentiments'. Romantic critics rarely debate outside the circumference of the individual adorning the external green cosmos, and the rhetorically embellished expressions of the personal emotions of the poet. However, with the acclaimed advances in literary theories, the modern, contemporary critics, while analyzing the text and the context, deconstruct the effigies of 'Nature' and 'Woman' devised by the author's pen, which has been a keen area of eco-feminist studies. This paper attempts to de-romanticize the poetic quests of William Wordsworth – the pioneer of the Romantic era, along with S.T. Coleridge, and the Poet-Laureate succeeding Southey – more prominently, his *Tintern Abbey* and *Lucy Poems*, from an eco-feminist perspective. Although the poet does not remark highly on his thoughts on gender issues, despite the decade witnessing the dawn of feminism with *Vindication*, the poet's portrayal of 'Woman' temperament amongst the green of 'Nature' has aroused eco-feminist critics' attention. The research scrutinizing the psyche of Wordsworth, and the personal emotions of the poet, de-romanticizes the idyllic landscape and the poised woman in the pastures as the victims of culture; and masculinity – both of which have sculptured the former into effigies of appreciation, adornment, and adoption.



Received: 26.05.2026

Accepted: 10.06.2026

Published: 15.06.2026

CJHSSC, Volume: 2

Issue: 1, June 2026

Page: 62 - 72

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20679832>

Copyright: Author © 2026



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Published by: Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College,
Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

Available at: www.ssjalangirlscollege.org.in/journal.php
Email: confluence.ssjgc@gmail.com

Keywords: Emotions, Femininity, Masculinity, Nature, Romantic Poetry, Ecofeminism.

Introduction

“We see then in nature devoid of reason only a fortunate sister, who remained behind in the maternal home, out of which we stormed in the high spirits of our freedom into foreign parts. With painful desire, we long to return thence, as soon as we’ve begun to experience the distress of culture and hear in the foreign country of art, the moving voice of the mother. So long as we were merely children of nature, we were happy and perfect; we have become free and have lost both”. (Schiller)

From demarcating distinct boundaries of ‘naïve’ and ‘sentimental poetry’, and highlighting the increased estrangement of Man from the motherly warmth of the external cosmos to equating the association of Man-Nature to that of Brother-sister, or Son-Mother – Friedrich Schiller, much prior to the advent of Romanticism, let alone Ecocriticism, undeniably lays the foundations of what Françoise d’Eaubonne coined as ‘ecofeminism’. Often considered by the modern critic as a sub-branch of the studies of ecological criticism that interpreted the relationship of human society with its physical environment, Ecofeminism, in precise terms, “argues that patriarchal society’s values and beliefs have resulted in the oppression of both women and nature” (Nayar, 340). M.H. Abrams, in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, explicates Ecofeminism as “the analysis of role attributed to women in fantasies of natural environment by male authors, as well as the study of specifically feminine conceptions of the environment in the neglected nature writings by the female authors” (Abrams, 98).

Explicating the terminology with a broader perspective, d’Eaubonne writes in *Feminism or Death*, “Practically everyone knows that the two most immediate threats of death are overpopulation and the destruction of natural resources; fewer are aware of the entire responsibility of the male system. Having seized the control of soil and the mother’s womb, it was logical that the overexploitation of the one and the other would result in the double peril: a glut of births and a glut of products” (d’Eaubonne, 167). It appears quite intriguing that although modern critics do possibly trace the bare bones of Ecofeminism back to the words of Schiller in his essay *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, the German philosopher attempted to pave the way for the ‘new’ sentimental poetry, or the Romantic poetry. Locating chronologically, the era of Romanticism commenced post the Age of Prose and Reason, and prior to the Victorian period; therefore, in between reason and science, do literary intellectuals place the period of Romantic literature. A glance at the socio-cultural and political context of the contemporary era reveals to

the critical eye the impact of two prominent events that led to the articulation of what the critics address as the Romantic period: the French Revolution of 1789 and the Peterloo Massacre of 1819. The determination for a state that promised 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity' to all its citizens, devoid of the probable bars of discrimination, that began with the notes of justice and harmony to all, ended up with the frolics of death and anarchy. In addition to the political turbulence of the age, one observes the Industrial Revolution spreading its roots to the eminent circles of European society. It was amidst these social and political upheavals that William Wordsworth and S.T. Coleridge emerged on the literary scene with their *Lyrical Ballads*, published in 1798, embarking on a 'new' venture for British literature, by transforming the spirit of poetry from being 'a mirror of society' to 'emotions recollected in tranquility'.

Although William Blake, with his *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, had already paved the way for Romanticism to penetrate into the socio-cultural gamut of the contemporary psyche, it was with the publication of the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* that agitated the Neo-classicists and stirred a debate that remains controversial till date. Wordsworth's resoluteness to embrace the poetic genre of literature, as a product of "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" and an expression of the "emotions recollected in tranquility," has been the nucleus of subsequent literary criticisms and accusations, from Thomas Love Peacock in *The Four Ages of Poetry*, to Eliot in *Tradition and Individual Talent*. Extracting common place events from the lives of 'ordinary men and women', with a language exhibiting minimal ornamentations, and exploring the rusticity of Man in Nature – *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* acknowledged Romanticism as a bridge to reconnect Man with his inner self through imagination and subjectivity; and, at the same time, associate him with the enigmatic cosmos surrounding Man in the form of Nature.

However, it is with this perspective of Wordsworth, as the poet-philosopher illustrates in his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, that he has been equally accused of the politics and cultural conflicts of the era. Taking into consideration the turbulent waves of revolution hitting the European civilization, the critical eye not only encounters in the pages of history, Wordsworth's visit to France as a graduate in 1792, which prompted in the young mind the idea of Romanticism, but also a possible contemplation on gender issues with the publication of the seminal treatise of Mary Wollstonecraft in the same year, 1792. At this juncture, one shall not hesitate to negate, therefore, the assertion that William Wordsworth and his Romantic imagination remained remote from the political and socio-cultural scenarios of the time. The Cambridge Companion to William Wordsworth, quite intriguingly, weaves the biographical details of the Poet Laureate

succeeding Robert Southey, not only as a Man who was orphaned at the age of thirteen, graduated with” no more than an unclassified BA from Cambridge”, and remained yet, a financially-insecure poet despite the evolving association with S.T. Coleridge and a recognized founder of the ‘Lake School of Poetry’; but also, as a personality who could be studied as “a republican who laid plans for a radical monthly called the *Philanthropist*, and may have been involved in a liberal London weekly of that name, as an author of the oppositional political tracts, and of an unpublished letter to the Bishop of Llandaff, written in defence of the regicide in France and rights of man at home” (Cambridge,5).

Therefore, one gets certain of Wordsworth, not walking on the idealistic roads of manners. His active participation in politics keeps the poet grounded in the roots of reality. However, what appears bewildering to the literary critics remains a controversy to be analyzed. Despite the seeds of feminism witnessing their dawn at the brink of the Enlightenment that have been advocated by Burney novels, the critical reader fails to scrutinize Wordsworth’s position at this juncture of ecology and femininity. Although Michael Foucault claims the poet to be anti-feminist in his attitude and individuality, the literary critics hesitate to support any argument regarding Wordsworth’s stance owing to his own individual portrayal of Dorothy and Lucy, and the female gender in general.

De-Romanticizing the Text and the Context of *Tintern Abbey* and *Lucy Poems*

Barbour, in the research “Between Two Worlds: The Structure of the Argument in *Tintern Abbey*”, commenting on the diverse criticism *Tintern Abbey* calls, writes, “In general, critics have looked upon the poem much as a great Elizabethan landowner saw a dissolved monastery: as an attractive ruin whose beautifully dressed stones could be carried off and put to better purposes” (Barbour). What appears intriguing is that although Barbour aimed to deconstruct the religious beliefs of Wordsworth in his cited research, yet eco-critics and feminist scholars view in the light of Barbour’s argument observes Wordsworth as the landowner who has arrived after “five long summers”, and equally “long winters” back to the dissolved architect, not to trade, but to contemplate on the prices Man has bargained in the process of thriving in the chaos of culture and masculinity.

The serenity of the “dark sycamore”; the “orchard-tufts with unripe fruits”; “sportive wood” running wild; “pastoral farms”; and the enigmatic smoke that probably sources itself from the woods of the “vagrant dwellers”, or the “Hermit’s cave” – all of these that unify in the

panorama the poet visions standing at the infinite hub of Nature, at the banks of Wye, arouses in the him complicated emotions that traverse across the realms of time, memory and space. Not only does Wordsworth appear to be mesmerized by the glimpse, but the critical eye also observes the poet being obliged to the motherly warmth the green cosmos provides in the hours of weariness amidst the “towns and cities”. The poet beholds:

“I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind
With tranquil restoration” (*Tintern Abbey*)

The detailed description of the idyllic landscape William Wordsworth nurtures in his poetic quest, however, appears to be complicated as the venture progresses, highlighting the advances of the poet in mentality, maturity, and meaning. Delegating the calm and untamed Nature as the locus of his growth and upswing. From being the “roe” which would bound over hills and mountains; be amused by the flowing streams of water bodies; afraid of the hidden enigma life and circumstance holds; impassioned by the “sounding cataract”; and, experiencing the charm of the “the tall rock, the mountain, and the deep an gloomy wood, Their colours and their forms” to being the recipient of “other gifts” that were capable of “abundant recompense” – William Wordsworth, not only traces the trajectory of his mature being in comparison to his past self, but also glorifies the Nature as his “anchor”; “nurse”; “guide”; and “guardian” of his heart, soul and moral being. (*Tintern Abbey*)

The moment the poet captures Nature in the form of nurse and guardian, the critical eye immediately associates it with being his ‘Mother’; and the ‘provider’ of the motherly warmth, of which Wordsworth has been bereaved of in his quest to discover the potentialities of the urbanscape. However, the argument does not bewilder the critical reader, as the poet has addressed the forces of Nature equal to his Mother, or the feminine figure of benevolence and motherhood, prominently in *Expostulation and Reply* and *The Immortality Ode*. The phrases employed in both of these verses in the form of “Mother Earth” and “homely nurse” evince what the critical reader appears to be suggestive of. However, what is the prime locus of

discussion is not the explication of the idyllic landscape that Wordsworth envisions, or the playfulness of memory and feelings, but significantly Wordsworth's application of Natural forces to highlight the loss of the innocence in Man, for which he has to return to his Mother; and the weight of industrialization the age is seeking after, which in a way is exploiting the ravishing the maternity of Nature, as Schiller had remarked –“So long as we were merely children of nature, we were happy and perfect; we have become free, and have lost both” (Schiller).

Until this juncture, one finds only the presence of eco-critical elements that could be deconstructed by literary scholars with the view of Man harassing the ecological equilibrium, and illustrating it only as an unvoiced, unheard recipient of Man's gluttony; however, the eco-feminist elements are traced with the culminating stanzas of *Tintern Abbey* with the summoning of Dorothy Wordsworth. It appears quite intriguing that although, the critical reader does not witness the disposition of the Poet in the selected poetic marvels of William Wordsworth as tyrannical, and authoritative, rather the Poet manifests his 'self' as an observer of the beauty of his human, and non-human counterpart, and at the same time seeks solace and relief from the chaos of 'culture' and 'masculinity' in the warm company of the 'nature' and 'femininity'. An intricate and meticulous reading of *Tintern Abbey* corroborates the aforementioned argument of Wordsworth standing at the blurring boundaries of feminism and anti-feminism.

Although the Cambridge Companion to William Wordsworth reveals the poet appreciating Women's writing and their efforts to emerge from the confines of domesticity and private space to the public arena, the illustration the poet carves on the panorama of his idyllic landscape stirs ambiguity amongst literary scholars and intellectuals. John Powell Ward, in the research entitled “Will No One Tell Me What She Sings?: Women and Gender in the Poetry of William Wordsworth,” argues, “Again, it is feminists, such as Anne Mellor and Mary Jacobus, who have alerted Wordsworth critics to crucial aspects of his work scarcely considered before. Nevertheless, the now prevailing view is that Wordsworth rendered his poetry's women silent if not brain dead in order to make a male voice predominate” (Ward).

The critic, continuing his argument, cites Anne Mellor, who asserted that Wordsworth “stole from women their primary cultural authority as the experts in delicate, tender feelings and, by extension, moral purity and goodness” (Ward). A glance at *Tintern Abbey* and *Lucy Poems*, and the critical eye is evinced by Mellor's argument; and, also observes the portrayal of Nature as delicate, serene and pure – equal to the disposition of a woman, therefore sculpturing the effigies of 'Nature' and 'Woman', where both are unvoiced, secluded and adorned for their physical

manifestations, by the Man who has wandered the roads of reason, freedom and industries in the urbanscape, similar to Wordsworth. Scrutinizing from this perspective, the critical eye ceases to remember the Romantic chasm, and the element of self-reflection, and subsequently de-romanticizes the effigies constructed by Wordsworth of Nature and Woman, who are then to be understood as victims of ‘culture’ and ‘Man’.

Literary critics often underline the thematic and artistic fusion of the Wordsworthian poem, despite its apparent clarity and distinct rhetoric, as ambiguous and perplexing, for the author probably might have overlooked the structure of the work as more of a riddle, with contradictory opinions on the primary theme concerning the text. “Albert S. Gerard has described the structure of the poem as a pattern of ascent and descent which is repeated twice: ascent towards the loftiest heights of mystical speculation, descent towards the firm ground of ascertained fact” (Nabholz). Caught in a predicament by the critical reader, dodging between memories, reality, and the emotions the future beholds, one fails to identify Wordsworth’s true intention of revisiting the tranquility of the banks of the Wye, and subsequently composing these lines a few miles above Tintern Abbey.

Tracing back the historical context of the time Wordsworth was articulating this poem, *The Cambridge Companion to William Wordsworth* informs the critical eye about the aimless wanderings of the Poet, post his excursion to France, in the different corners of the city, and his controversial lodgings with Dorothy, his sister. William Wordsworth has often been accused by literary critics and scholars of incorporating the crucial sentiments of Dorothy, penned down by the lady in her journal entries, as a significant substance of his poem – very much evident in the contextual analysis of *Daffodils*. It appears quite intriguing that years later, during the rise of Modern Novel, Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*, devises the imaginary Judith Shakespeare, as the sister of William Shakespeare, who was devoid of expression owing to the patriarchal foundations of the society; in the case of Wordsworth, and Dorothy, the critical eye equates the fictional instance of Woolf as the fact of Wordsworth’s life. “Some feminist criticism has focused on William’s alleged theft of Dorothy’s ideas and images from the journals and on his preventing her from pursuing her own career as a writer. However, it is hard to argue that Dorothy missed out on a writing career for her devotion, but it is certainly true that she sacrificed herself as a woman to William’s vocational desires” (Cambridge,138).

Identifying Nature with Dorothy, not only does Wordsworth establish a balanced equation of Nature with femininity, but also poses to exercise what could be addressed as an

anthropocentric approach to Nature, as the Masculine domination of the feminine. It appears quite intriguing that although the poet does not record in his rhetorical statement any hue of oppression, and that his affection towards his sibling is undeniably immense, yet the silence of Dorothy and her brother's address to the moon and the wild ecstasies that would unite with Dorothy's desires provoke controversy at the feminist stance of William Wordsworth. Yet, how far Wordsworth remained to be opportunistic and self-absorbed; one appears to be dubious, for the culminating stanzas of *Tintern Abbey* address the affection of Wordsworth and Dorothy by the poet. Nabholz in "The Integrity of Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*" comments at this juncture, "The majority of the readers have seen this section as a disturbingly long postscript of 'anticlimax' to the true climax of the poem, the famous affirmation of unity and love of nature, and have argued that this section represents Wordsworth's attempt to convince himself of a faith in nature which in fact he knows to be not true" (Nabholz).

The critic continues that, quite similar to the other poems belonging to the poetical canon of William Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey* might be principally emphasizing the progress of the human mind, which initially acknowledged its dependence on Nature's femininity, and subsequently recognizes its superiority over it. William Wordsworth, having wandered in solitude, had apparently found in his renewed relationship with Dorothy a domestic refuge. From the Lake District and Germany to Grasmere, their association with one another and with the creative aspect of artistic creation developed and became the prominent angle of Dorothy's *Grasmere Journals*. However, historical data reveal that the months spent with Dorothy in Germany altered the course of direction for Wordsworth's poetic quests. Separated from England with Dorothy in a town named Goslar, according to critics, it was in this phase of life that Wordsworth's identity was cultivated to its most mature terms. There have been certain speculations by critics that the Goslar people considered William to be Dorothy's lover. Wordsworth's recent biographer, Kenneth Johnston, advocating the trains of the speculations, contemplated the *Lucy Poems* to be the product of this unacknowledged tension.

The Cambridge Companion to William Wordsworth notes, "the period of German isolation and alienation influenced Wordsworth not only in reformulating his English identity but in embracing the conviction that his only home could be England, thus the merging of his patriotic and domestic love" (Cambridge,128). One can perceive the conjunction as the interconnection of masculinity and femininity – the English culture that upholds patriarchy, and the familial bond of Dorothy that is sought as a refuge by Wordsworth. However, the

composition of Lucy Poems was indeed layered by the “emotional foundations of Wordsworth’s relationship with Dorothy”, yet the critical reader appears to be suspicious of the origins of the poetic piece, adhering to Matlak’s research in “Wordsworth’s *Lucy Poems* in Psychobiographical Context”.

The critic, advocating the trails of Bateson take note of, “Wordsworth’s relationship with Dorothy was probably stifling and inhibitive at the time of *Lucy Poems*’ composition.” Matlak further writes, “The consequence of Wordsworth’s depression for his work was the fantasy of Dorothy’s death in the Lucy poems. Wordsworth both loved and wished to get rid of her because of the serious inconvenience of her presence, and the Lucy poems formed as an expression of this ambivalence. Lucy became not so much an exact equivalent of Dorothy as an amorphous and thus safe object for the hospitalities Dorothy aroused” (Matlak). The leading verse entitled *Strange Fits of Passion* the anxiousness of Wordsworth is deconstructed not only with the absence of the female effigy of Nature, but also with the metaphor of the ‘sinking moon’ the poet visions while his journey to Lucy’s cottage. Equating the femininity of Lucy with the beauty and freshness of a rose, yet the ‘strangeness’ of Wordsworth’s passion for the female figure appears to invoke a sense of queer in the ambience, formulating the ballad.

The evening moon, neighing horse, illusory dream of the poet, and the descending moon – all of the instances end up with the assumption of Lucy’s death, and the poet remaining in his anxiety and strange fits of passion. While analyzing the eco-feminist elements in the first section, one can assert the sinking Moon and the evening time as the setting of Nature, while Man is within the urbanscape. Such a reading is further suggested by the next verse, *She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways* – as the poet writes;

“A violet by a mossy stone

Half-hidden from the eye!

Fair as a star, when only one

Is shining in the sky” (*Lucy Poems*)

Inhabiting a locale that remains ‘untrodden’, Lucy’s residence is analyzed to be at the margins of the city that is central to the Dove’s river; and with the above-mentioned words, the poet positions Nature and Culture at complementary levels. With the appreciation of Nature, it, at the

same time, brings on the surface the mossy stone of the dissolved monastery that takes the form of Industries and the contaminated urbanscape. Nonetheless, it is with the fourth section of the Lucy poems titled, “*Three Years she Grew in Sun and Shower*” that Wordsworth skillfully and distinctly equates and associates the effigies of ‘Nature’ and ‘Woman’.

“Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower

Then Nature said, ‘A lovelier flower’

On earth was never sown

This child I to myself will take;

She shall be mine, and I will make

A lady of my own” (*Lucy Poems*)

With the culminating lines of the fifth section, the equation of ‘Nature’ and ‘Woman’ appears to be balanced; for Lucy’s death now transforms ‘her’ identity with the motions of time, memory, and space. One can then at this juncture assume Wordsworth’s stance against the gender roles of femininity – a child of Nature, who is manifested with the powers of the Nature, and whose death brings her one with the Nature; and for masculinity – a son of Nature, who is manifested with the ‘care’ and ‘resources’ of the Nature, who is liberated from his accountability to stabilize Nature, but will never attempt to unify owing to the superiority of his being.

Conclusion

There have been ample interpretations regarding the identity of Lucy – the speculations of the abstract being associated with Dorothy, or as Annette Vallon, or as an English maiden that had caught sight of Wordsworth amidst the pastures of the English green fields – yet, due to a lack of certain historical evidence, Wordsworthian critics fail to recognize the identity of Lucy. However, as far as the eco-feminist elements are concerned, one can undeniably assert the Poet’s anxiety; the solace in the arms of Nature; and the serenity of femininity as the circumscribing stance for Wordsworth to equate Nature with Woman. A re-visitation to a few other verses of the poet, be it *Nutting*, *The Solitary Reaper*, or the *Prelude* – the critical reader not only comprehends a lop-sided affection of the Poet towards the effigies he has constructed, but also the Man as an observer to the functioning of Nature. And, as far as the female figures are concerned, the critical reader

finds them to be mute, unvoiced, and ornamented as the substance of adornment and appreciation, without having a voice of their own. What Wordsworth, therefore, romanticizes as a venture into a deeper self that is expressed in “emotions recollected in tranquility” are then, when viewed from the eco-feminist perspective, not confined to figures that the critical reader can appreciate and glorify.

References

- Abrams, M. H., & Harpham, G. G. (2012). *A glossary of literary terms* (10th ed.). Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Barbour, B. (1993). “Between two worlds”: The structure of the argument in “Tintern Abbey.” *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 48(2), 147–168. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2933888>
- D'Eaubonne, F. (2020). *Feminism or death* (R. Hotell, Trans.). Verso.
- Gill, S. (Ed.). (2003). *The Cambridge Companion to William Wordsworth*. Cambridge University Press.
- Matlak, R. E. (1978). Wordsworth's Lucy poems in psychobiographical context. *PMLA*, 93(1), 46–65. <https://doi.org/10.2307/461819>
- Nabholtz, J. R. (1974). The integrity of Wordsworth's “Tintern Abbey.” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 73(2), 227–238.
- Nayar, P. K. (2010). *Contemporary literary and cultural theory: From structuralism to ecocriticism*. Pearson Education India.
- Schiller, F. (2005). *On naïve and sentimental poetry*. The Schiller Institute. https://archive.schillerinstitute.com/transl/Schiller_essays/naive_sentimental-1.html
- Ward, J. P. (1997). “Will no one tell me what she sings?”: Women and gender in the poetry of William Wordsworth. *Studies in Romanticism*, 36(4), 611–633. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25601256>
- Wordsworth, W. (1798). *Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the banks of Wye during a tour, July 13, 1798*. Poetry Foundation. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45527/lines-composed-a-few-miles-above-tintern-abbey-on-revisiting-the-banks-of-the-wye-during-a-tour-july-13-1798>
- Wordsworth, W. (1798). *Lucy poems*. https://pressbooks.pub/app/uploads/sites/4356/2021/12/1798_1801_Lucy_poems.pdf



From Man's World to Gaia's: An Ecocritical Reading of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826)

Dipyaman Bhowmick

Postgraduate Student

Department of English,

Jadavpur University.

Email: dipyamanb.eng.pg@jadavpuruniversity.in

Abstract

Set in a plague-ravaged twenty-first-century world, Mary Shelley's three-volume novel *The Last Man* (1826) narrates the tragic tale of the protagonist, Lionel Verney, and his network of friends and family as they battle a deadly pathogen that engulfs the planet. The novel's shifting interactions between human beings and Mother Earth, in which the apparently powerless natural world eventually becomes the planet's domineering force, will be analysed in depth in this ecocritical reading of Shelley's text, with aid from the scholarly works of Barbara Johnson, Morton Paley, and Simon Estok. The idea that a pandemic can cause armageddon – a very palpable reality in this post-COVID-19 world – makes a novel like *The Last Man* quite prescient. Further, this article will explore how Shelley writes her life into the formulation of the plot of *The Last Man* through a biographical reading of the text. Finally, this study will employ the theories propounded by noted critics like Val Plumwood, Karren Warren, and Vandana Shiva to present an ecofeminist reading of the text, through close analysis of the diverse cast of male and female characters, particularly Lionel Verney and the earth mother herself, who emerges as an ecofeminist all-powerful creation in Mary Shelley's nonpareil dystopian novel.



Received: 27.04.2026

Accepted: 01.06.2026

Published: 15.06.2026

CJHSSC, Volume: 2

Issue: 1, June 2026

Page: 73 - 86

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20680115>

Copyright: Author © 2026



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Published by: Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College,
Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

Available at: www.ssjalangirlscollege.org.in/journal.php

Email: confluence.sjgc@gmail.com

Keywords: Mary Shelley, *The Last Man* (1826), Ecocriticism, ecofeminism, dystopian literature.

Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall;
And universal Darkness buries All.

– Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad*.

Introduction

Alongside the renowned 1818 novel *Frankenstein* (1818), Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797-1851) is the author of the dystopian three-volume novel *The Last Man*, published in 1826. *The Last Man* is set in a plague-ravaged twenty-first-century England caught in the throes of a political upheaval precipitated by a shift from authoritarian monarchy to a republican form of government. The narrative pivots around five principal characters connected through fraternal and marital bonds. Lionel Verney is the narrator and the eponymous “last man” who emerges as the sole survivor of the pandemic. Lionel’s dear friend Adrian is the son of the last ruler of England and is imbued with republican principles, and Lord Raymond, who aspired to become England’s King. The two primary female personae of the novel are Perdita – Lionel’s sister and the wife of Raymond – and Idris, sister to Adrian and Lionel’s betrothed.

The first volume of the novel narrates the lives of the principal characters and records the personal and political machinations fuelling Britain’s political transformation. Lionel and Perdita, who had once been very close to the inner circle at the royal court, now lived on the outskirts of England due to disagreements with the royalty and their father. Both of them, however, had been friends with Adrian and were gradually reintroduced into the social life of urban England.

The second segment opens with Lord Raymond setting out for Greece to fight the incoming Turkish forces. It is during this war that the deadly pathogen emerges in the open and begins its dance of destruction. To add to her woes, along with the ravages of the disease, England was severely weakened by waves of invasions by the Irish and the Americans, and a terrible climate. This compels a mass exodus of the British population into mainland Europe. However, with a frightening pace, the plague scythed through humanity, and spared none save Lionel.

Now based in a post-apocalyptic world, the final division of Shelley’s work is a record of Lionel’s wanderings through the world with “a shaggy fellow, half water and half shepherd’s dog” who became his “only company” (Shelley, 2011, p. 680). The novel concludes in the year 2100 with the titular character wandering the wilderness of a planet devoid of people, yet pregnant again with the sublime beauty of the natural world, following the fall of *Homosapiens*.

In the Introduction to the landmark *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Cheryll Glotfelty defines Ecocriticism as the “study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xviii). Employing Glotfelty’s ecocritical lens, the first section of this article will look at the changing role of the interactions between the natural and the social world in *The Last Man*, through the varied points of view of the primary characters in the novel. After a brief reading of the biographical imprints of Shelley’s life in the novel, the article will turn to analysing Shelley’s text through an ecofeminist optic, with the life-giving mother nature as the primary ecofeminist force of the novel.

The Binary between Nature and Human

The very genesis of the novel contains an ecological element. The Prologue to *The Last Man* begins with an unnamed third-person narrator exploring the ancient caves in Naples and quite unexpectedly discovering the “last man” Lionel Verney’s manuscript, etched on a natural sheet of “Sibylline leaves” (Shelley, 2011, p. 46), of pre- and post-plague life as recorded by Lionel. This is how Verney begins his tale,

I AM the native of a sea-surrounded nook, a cloud-enshadowed land which, when the surface of the globe, with its shoreless ocean and trackless continents, presents itself to my mind, appears only as an inconsiderable speck in the immense whole; and yet, when balanced in the scale of mental power, far outweighed. So true it is that man’s mind alone was the creator of all that was good or great to man, and that Nature herself was only his first minister. (Shelley, 2011, p. 50)

In the very beginning of the narration, a binary is being constructed between human beings being the “superior” creator of “all that was good” with the world, and the relegation of the realm of “Nature” into a mere subservient “minister” of her human overlords. It is quite astonishing that such a form of binary could still be conceived by someone who was the final survivor of a powerful pathogen that had devastated humanity. This dichotomous way of thinking is crucial to the ecocritical perusal of canonical literature to interrogate how man has used his ‘superior’ cranial abilities to justify domination over the ‘dumb’ world of nature.

It may be noted here that the narrator, while providing a retrospective account of living in a post-plague world, does not begin by identifying himself as the narrator, thereby moving away from following the conventional openings of most of the canonical eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels. Being well aware of nature’s immense power, he calls himself a “native of a sea-

surrounded nook”, thereby locating himself within the environmental realm and identifying with the same, thereby implicating that despite his haughty outlook on the natural place of natural world vis-à-vis humanity, he ultimately betrays his awareness that, along with the rest of his species, had no choice but to survive under the domain of the all-powerful natural world. The uses of words like “shoreless” and “trackless” further buttress the sublime and expansive grandeur of nature. This is quite unlike the opening words of a homo-centric novel like *Robinson Crusoe*, which begins with the narrator identifying himself within a social milieu saying “I Was born in the Year 1632, in the City of York of a good Family, tho’ not of that Country, my Father being a Foreigner of Bremen, who settled first at Hull.” (Defoe, 2007, p. 84) *Crusoe* is a tale of the conquest of nature by man, while Shelley’s novel inverts this anthropocentric paradigm on its head.

However, quite inexplicably, in the subsequent lines the narrator again rehashes the binary between the anthropocentric ideas about the physical world of nature and the mental realm of man and labels the environment as being man’s mere “minister” since man’s “mental power”, i.e. the power of reasoning as opposed to mute nature’s brute force was far superior to anything that nature could ever hope to create, including the plague.

The fact that the story contained in the “Sibylline leaves” outlives the natural Armageddon may also be seen as a testament to the power of the human faculty and the uniquely human art of writing and narrating stories. But at the same time, the material fact ‘on the ground’ fact of Verney’s world was that of an abject apocalypse, where nature triumphed over the human beings and the sibylline leaves could only find their way into the author’s hands by virtue of their spotless preservation in a natural, geological space. Thus, in a way, it was indeed nature’s will to transmit this message as a statement of her prowess to posterity, necessitating the all-powerful ‘homo humanus’ to recognise their dependence on the order of nature.

The ecological world plays an essential role in the life of Verney, too. In the introductory phase of the novel, Lionel and his sister Perdita are found to be leading an isolated existence in “mountain abodes” amidst nature, far from the “busy haunts of men” (Shelley, 2011, p. 65). This, however, did not satisfy Lionel as it “did not accord [him] with the love of action and desire of human sympathy.” (Shelley, 2011, p. 56)

Later in the text, they make their way back into the social world and are warmly made to feel at home by Adrian, who wishes to put past familial disagreements behind them and not let the bygone family feuds hurt his friendship with Lionel. Lionel, however, after long years in the

wilderness, could never quite fit into this cultural world and got caught in the crossfire between the tussle of pro-democratic and monarchical ideas of Adrian and Raymond, summed up in the words “Adrian despised the narrow views of the politician, and Raymond held in supreme contempt the benevolent visions of the philanthropist” (Shelley, 2011, p. 100). Nature was, therefore, a nurturer for Lionel and provided his beloved sister and himself a happy and safe life after their father, who had once been a close friend of the king, had squandered most of his wealth in the city and needlessly feuded with the royals. Interestingly, nature continues to remain a safe haven for Lionel even after the plague had murdered the rest of his species. After recovering from the ailment, he roamed the continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa in desperate search for human life and company, accompanied by a dog (he also had a dog in his shepherding days of the past), another creature of the environment. Perhaps it is not a matter of mere coincidence that the novel begins and ends with the “last man” searching for human company in a world devoid of their existence, but rather speaks to the omnipotence of the natural world, and humanity’s circular, never-ending desire to break free from the hands of Mother Earth – a nurturer and destroyer in equal measure.

What changes in the mind of “the last man” throughout the novel are his feelings pertaining to the natural realm. Towards the beginning of the text, when he lived in the wilds voluntarily, his experiences in nature were pleasant and joyous as expressed in these jubilant lines,

A beech wood stretched up the hill behind, and a purling brook gently falling from the acclivity ran through poplar-shaded banks into the lake. I lived with a farmer whose house was built higher up among the hills: a dark crag rose behind it, and, exposed to the north, the snow lay in its crevices the summer through. Before dawn, I led my flock to the sheep-walks and guarded them through the day. It was a life of toil; for rain and cold were more frequent than sunshine; but it was my pride to contain the elements. My trusty dog watched the sheep... (Shelley, 2011, p. 61)

This view of nature changes sharply towards the conclusion of the narrative, and a starkly different view of the natural world develops in Lionel’s psyche.

The lone wanderer will still unfurl his sail, and clasp the tiller—and, still obeying the breezes of heaven, for ever round another and another promontory, anchoring in another and another bay, still ploughing seedless ocean, leaving behind the verdant land of native Europe, a down the tawny shore of Africa, having weathered the fierce seas of

the Cape, I may moor my worn skiff in a creek, shaded by spicy groves of the odorous islands of the far Indian ocean. (Shelley, 2011, p. 683)

From roaming without a care in the lush, pastoral dells of the British Isles, Lionel finds himself in a very different natural landscape through the course of the narrative. However, in both of these markedly different stages of his life, Lionel and his dog are alone in the world of nature. The former is a pastoral scene, while the latter could be read in “ecoGothic” terms, following the coinage of this term by Andrew Smith and William Hughes in the introductory chapter to the volume *EcoGothic*. Smith and Hughes define the “ecoGothic” as the “Gothic’s representation of ‘evil’ and fear emanating from the ecological world” (Smith & Hughes, 2013, p. 1). Shelley’s novel invokes these ecoGothic ideas through the depiction of the elemental forces of nature and the raging battle between humans and a fearsome natural world. Here, nature becomes the principal source of a foreboding, Gothic doom that Verney had to grapple with, which engenders the transformation of his perception of the world around him. Lionel and the human world hence undergo a journey from being able to “contain the elements” to having to obey “the breezes” of the environment. Thereby, flipping the script, it is the human beings who turn into nature’s hapless “minister[s]”. Verney thus displays what Simon Estok calls “ecophobia” in “Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia”. In this article, Estok defines “ecophobia” as possessing a recognisable “contempt for the natural world” (Estok, 2009, p. 204). The ecoGothic power of the plague, however, shuts this ecophobic “contempt” forcefully. Shelley’s ecoGothic nature, in turn, echoes Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland’s idea that “Nature in the Gothic is so effectively uncanny because it is known and unknown all at once – strangely made visible in these stories in a way that often challenges our foolish sense of human self-enclosure” (Parker & Poland, 2019, p. 5) in “*Gothic Nature: An Introduction*”.

Thus, Lionel – as a representative of his species – goes from being inside the world of nature to going against the natural world. It becomes quite clear to him that while he believed during his days of tending to this flock that he was heroically standing atop nature, he was, in fact, a component of Mother Earth. Once Gaia decided to up the ante and invaded the delusional sense of self-enclosure that Verney and other men had thought they had erected, it became quite clear that being within the natural world was far more favourable to humanity’s survival than being up in arms against her.

In “*The Last Man: Apocalypse Without Millennium*”, Morton Paley notes that while narrating and recording the events, Lionel “imagines a live reader for his narrative” (Paley, 1993, p. 11)

inhabiting the planet in the future. The very idea of envisioning a future readership of his writings contradicts the idea of the ‘last-ness’ of humanity. Lionel’s motivation for keeping a record of his solo experiences was certainly wrought in a hope that humanity would again regain standing sometime in the future, and he would be able to ‘live’ through his words to transmit his tale of conquering the ravages of nature and time to posterity.

Beyond Lionel, the other major characters in the novel also have complex interactions with the natural world. Adrian, for instance, was instrumental in reintroducing the ‘wild’ Lionel into polite society away from the natural world. Besides, in the city, Adrian punctiliously maintained “a park and preserves” where he would spend “delightful hours in watching the tribes of lovely and almost tame animals with which it was stocked, and ordered that greater care should be taken of them.” (Shelley, 2011, p. 70) Both of these actions colour Adrian as a patriarchal re-educative force who attempts to tame and control the natural world and its impulses by introducing and constraining them into social spaces. The idea that nature could be in any way governed by man, as Adrian had aspired to, is proved wrong by the plague.

Lord Raymond was a pompous aristocrat who wished to capture Constantinople in the hopes that his martial might would lead to his rise in power and prestige in the court of England. It is here – i.e., just at the opportune moment of some mortal’s ambition becoming disproportionate – that the plague emerges into view during Raymond’s campaign in Greece against the Turkish army. At the very outset of the plague’s spread, the disease is described in antagonist terms as an “enemy to the human race”, as noted by Barbara Johnson in the chapter “The Last Man”. Johnson argues that it was while fighting the ‘others’, i.e. the Turkish, the Europeans discover the “absolute Other” in the form of the plague (Johnson, 1993, p. 264). While the Greeks were on the path to victory, the emergence of the pathogen led to a wild scramble on the battlefield from both the warring contingents. Both victor and vanquished alike ran helter-skelter to shield themselves from the disease unsuccessfully. However, the plague’s victory brings an end to the Western hold over the world, and following Johnson’s article, seemingly “replaces” (Johnson, 1993, p. 264) the victory of the West over the East with its own conquest of the entire globe.

In the narrative context of the novel, this was the first time human beings encountered what it meant to be pitted against the powerful forces of nature. The chaos caused by the pestilence wiped out the false perceptions that led Adrian and Lionel to mistakenly assume that they could dominate nature. Alongside the millions of deaths, and social and political instability caused by the plague, the contagion’s spread also led to invasion by the peoples living from the “uncultivated wilds” of America and Ireland (Shelley, 2011, p. 361), who had arrived to find safer

places to live in the United Kingdom, effectively colonising England only for the affliction to end their lives as well in short notice. Additionally, deadly storms wreaked havoc on the coastal towns of England. These multipronged assaults on the social world of the novel – by both natural and human forces – foment a complete devastation of British, and later global, social, political, and cultural order.

Here, the metaphor of Mary Shelley’s seminal creation – Frankenstein – can be used to elaborate on the ideas of the Other found in *The Last Man*. Frankenstein was artificially created by a scientist, but not adequately nurtured. As a result of this, the so-called monster turned rogue and ultimately turned on its creator. Extending this logic, human beings may be read as a creation of nature, but again, who ultimately turned rogue with the help of technology and became an “absolute Other” to nature, while also regarding the natural world in a similar vein.

Biographical Imprints in *The Last Man*

Being a woman herself, Mary Shelley locates the complex dynamics of a patriarchal society from an intellectual, as well as aesthetic and ethical angle. Morton Paley observes in the Introduction to the 2011 Oxford edition of *The Last Man* that the text is replete with biographical details from Mary Shelley’s life and her decorated contemporaries. In 1822, Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) – the husband of Mary, and the inspiration behind the freethinking Adrian – drowned in Italy. A couple of years later, Lord Byron (1788-1824), a close friend and colleague of the Shelley couple, succumbed to injuries while fighting for the Greeks against the Turkish troops, closely mirroring Lord Raymond’s ventures.

By 1826, Paley highlights, Mary Shelley was in dire need of financial support and had to publish her husband’s *Posthumous Poems*, something made considerably more difficult by the archconservative Timothy Shelley being adamantly opposed to the publication of his son’s radical, pro-republican works. To add to her hardships, Shelley was also looking for publishers for her writings to sustain her kids and herself. These struggles led Mary to lament in her diary, “THE LAST MAN! ‘Yes, I may well describe that solitary being’s feelings, feeling myself as the last relic of a beloved race, my companions extinct before me” (Shelley, May, 1824), lines which conspicuously resemble Lionel Verney’s laments in *The Last Man* (Paley, 2011, p. 1). This leads to the conclusion that Shelley herself saw nature as an adversary, as her husband had drowned in a natural setting, which had robbed her of her beloved Percy and led her to face considerable hardships alone. Thus, Shelley’s adversarial approach vis-à-vis nature is enunciated by her

labelling the natural calamity in the form of the plague as an “enemy to the human race”, and her own self.

Another notable influence behind the creation of *The Last Man* is a famous geological phenomenon of 1816. Often designated as the Year Without the Summer, the year 1816 saw a geologically intriguing phenomenon caused by the eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia a year before, something which had triggered a considerable change in the global climate. A host of apocalyptic works were penned responding to the aftermath of Tambora’s eruption. Curiously, the concept of a solitary survivor’s narration of events post-cataclysm found much vogue amongst Romantic authors of this day. Lord Byron wrote his famous “Darkness” and portrayed a world bereft of light where “darkness” became “the universe” and laid waste on human population, his narrator being the last surviving individual of the human race (Byron, 1817). The comparatively less canonical poem “The Last Man” by Thomas Campbell is also a verse narrative of the last “lonely” surviving individual in a world where “The Sun himself must die” (Campbell, 1832).

The Last Man, therefore, is not a novel written in isolation but was rather a product of its time, drew inspiration from a network of similar fictional proceedings, and also grew out of a range of Mary Shelley’s autobiographical reflections.

The Politics of Gender and Ecofeminism in *The Last Man*

Except the Countess of Windsor, the rigidly pro-monarchy mother of Adrian and Idris, who strongly opposed her daughter marrying Lionel, and Perdita, the cast of women characters in *The Last Man*, like Idris and Evadne Zaimi – Adrian’s beau – are ideal nineteenth-century epitomes of devoted wives to their outgoing, politically-active husbands. Care for and devotion to their partners and the running of the household are the primary markers of their identities. They are excluded from the realm of politics, formulation of policies to stem the spread of the disease, and reduce fatalities. The absence of women in these fields is ironic, as a prime tenet for limiting epidemic or pandemic deaths is adequate care and nourishment, which were seen as ‘feminine’ and ‘womanly’ qualities. The absence of women from the realm of care, and the consequent failure of the masculine networks of care, can be read as Shelley’s oblique critique regarding the exclusion of ‘feminine’ qualities in social and political decision-making.

The Countess of Windsor unsuccessfully schemed to orchestrate a return of the monarchy using her children, Adrian and Idris, as political pawns. This ultimately proved futile due to Adrian’s

stringent commitment to republicanism. This episode depicts the futility of a lone woman going against what had been predestined by society as her role.

In stark contrast to the courtly upbringing of the women mentioned above, Perdita grew up in an entirely different way with Lionel in the pristine woods and hills. She is described as spending “the time she could command she spent in solitude. She would ramble to the most unfrequented places, and scale dangerous heights, that in those unvisited spots she might wrap herself in loneliness” (Shelley, 2011, p. 59) and that she often “lost herself delightedly in these self-created wanderings, and returned with unwilling spirit to the dull detail of common life.” (Shelley, 2011, p. 60). In these lines, readers can spot a happy girl living in the lap of her mother earth. It was because of being wrenched from this natural world to fit into a world of social obligations that she lost her carefree disposition and became another typical lady, devotedly looking after the menfolk. Henceforth, a female character like Perdita in *The Last Man* is the happiest when away from the patriarchal social order, and becomes oppressed under the burden of a masculine social order, which opens up an ecofeminist reading of the novel. This strain of ecofeminist thought finds powerful expression in the sweeping wave of destruction that wipes out the masculine world order, root and branch, as explored in the next section of this exposition.

The all-powerful earth mother is certainly the most prominent presence in the novel. The plague represents an ecofeminist nature taking on a heteropatriarchal social world. While Lionel might have survived because of his closeness with the natural world, it may be argued that someone like Perdita could have emerged as an ecofeminist heroine and become a much more suitable survivor of the plague because of her gender identity and deeper engagement with Mother Nature. Writing in the nineteenth century, Shelley might have indeed struggled to imagine a woman being the last surviving member of the human species, given the patriarchal social order of her time.

It might also be useful to read the novels using Val Plumwood and Karen Warren’s theories of ecofeminism. In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Plumwood formulates a reason-nature dualism as a cudgel to expose how literature created a “master model” (Plumwood, 2005, p. 23) that seeks to employ reason as a “conceptual weapon” (Plumwood, 2005, p. 54) to exclude anything or anyone who was not seen as possessing “reason”. Traditionally, males have been seen as having the copyright on “reason”. Hence, women and nature were relegated to being dependent on men as their saviour. As a remedy, Plumwood uses the idea of an “anti-dualist” (Plumwood, 2005, p. 33) approach to combat the phallogentric nature of literature. This formulation finds further support in *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What it is and Why It Matters* by

Karen Warren, where Warren calls this system an “oppressive framework” created and enforced by this artificial, patriarchal social “value system” to justify hierarchal power relations between the members of society using binary expressions like “ups and downs” (Warren, 2005, p. 45). This further provides “logic of domination” (Warren, 2000, p. 46) as the existing privileges belonging to the “ups” (masculine) and desirable to be continued, and as an extension creates a logical, inviolable, hierarchical framework to perpetuate the oppression of the feminine forces, namely women and nature.

Also, within an ecofeminist framework, by virtue of the fact that nature does not remain a passive agent here as it was expected to be by Lionel and the patriarchal social framework, she rather emerges and exhibits what Vandana Shiva calls the *adishakti* of “Prakriti” (Sanskrit for ‘nature’) – “a powerful and effective primordial source of power” (Shiva, 1998, p. 38). This “primordial” power can be located in the havoc wreaked by the plague. There is also something essentially “primordial” about Perdita’s ability to be free and at home in nature, and not in the haunts of men in the social order. This *adishakti* (Sanskrit for ‘ancient power/force’) violates Warren’s “logic of domination” used by a masculine culture to oppress women and Gaia. Perdita and the Countess also emerge as “anti-dualist” heroines, while the rest conform to the code of dualism. The latter by virtue of her trying to pave a way for her will to continue and thereby fight back against a masculine culture, and the former because of the freedom and ease that she felt in the “anti-dualist” world of Gaia, something that she lacked in the “dualist” social world.

Notably, the character of Lionel can also be read from an “anti-dualist” angle. Lionel – an ecofeminist being – possesses the ability to gel with nature effortlessly and had to undergo considerable training in the hands of Adrian to fit into the public sphere, away from his natural training. However, his experience in the field of nature superseded his social training, owing to which he became the first and only man to recover from the plague, and the last man to survive the cataclysm. Portraying Lionel as the sole survivor is Shelley’s way of asserting that the feminine-ecofeminist ethos of a character like Lionel had enabled him to survive the natural hazard, something that no other masculine figure in the novel, or women operating within the patriarchal social matrix, was able to effectuate.

Conclusion: The Idea of ‘Last-ness’ and Survival

Closer to our times, films like *Armageddon* and *Don’t Look Up* address the issues of apocalypse and survival. While in the former, human beings successfully unite to destroy an asteroid headed towards the planet, the Leonardo Di Caprio-starring production *Don’t Look Up* depicts a hapless

twenty-first century world roiled by misinformation a world where humanity is sleepwalking towards disaster by apparently ignoring an incoming meteorite – standing as a metaphor for the current attitude exhibited by large sections of the global population and governments appertaining to the impending ecological crises. However, even in this movie, a small group of individuals did escape the planet in time and thereby became the ‘last’ people intent on continuing the human lineage. The in-progress HBO-produced television show *The Last of Us* documents the harsh lives of the survivors of the ‘last’ communities on earth after a human-made fungal microbe turns billions of people into zombies.

Moving into the world of print, Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road* presents a southward journey of a father and son in a scorched and hostile post-apocalyptic landscape in search of water. But on the way, the son is adopted by a kind woman while the father walks on. Thus, even in a wasteland, a communitarian spirit and hope seep in.

If this logic of survival is applied to diseases, epidemics, and pandemics, they have featured in literature for quite a long time. Giovanni Boccaccio’s *The Decameron* features a cohort of people who escaped plague-stricken Florence to spend time storytelling in a delightful country villa. Thus, in the time era of Boccaccio (1313-1375), escaping the city and being together with people was the coping mechanism employed. Fast forward three centuries, and the narrator of *The Journal of a Plague Year*, by Daniel Defoe (1660-1731), can be found trying to protect himself in the heart of the metropolis of London itself, since the countryside had been decimated by the titular ailment because of the mobility between the city and its outskirts. He also does not have the merry company that Boccaccio had envisaged, but has to stay safe by himself. It is the tale of an individual survivor, but here, the adage of ‘every man for himself’ can be seen as literally functioning since most individuals were trying to stay safe. *The Plague* by Albert Camus (1913-1960) presents a similar case in the town of plague-infested Oran, but replete with modern prevention techniques and the ultimate creation of a serum that successfully stemmed the flow of the disease, something consciously absent in the texts mentioned previously. Camus’s novel, however, ends with a chilling prediction of plague coming back in Oran. The epidemic becomes a pandemic in Emily St John Mandel’s (1979-) 2014 novel *Station Eleven* in the form of a “Georgian Flu”, which devastates the human world. However, not an insignificant number of people do survive the contagion, and they live almost like the *Homosapiens* of yore – in small, nomadic tribal bands. Therefore, in these books and films over the years, the idea of a spirit of survival against all odds emerges. This is something that Shelley envisages that kept Lionel

Verney going in *The Last Man* – trudging on in a barren world, in the hope of meeting a fellow human.

To conclude, this ecocritical reading of *The Last Man* thereby presents how Mother Nature morphs into a powerful force post-plague, effectively conquering the human world in the novel. Writing from the standpoint of an intellectually brilliant women having to weather the patriarchal nineteenth-century social mores, Mary Shelley presents her proto-feminist ideas through an ecofeminist angle in this text where the mother earth, and the ‘feminine’ Lionel to a much lesser extent, emerge as the most powerful forces in the novel after the overthrow of the patriarchal social order and the creation of an ecofeminist world, where nature reigns supreme and the Gaia becomes the ultimate source of power and authority.

References

- Bay, M. (Director). (1998). *Armageddon* [Film]. Buena Vista Pictures.
- Boccaccio, G. (2003). *The Decameron* (G. H. McWilliam, Trans.). Penguin Classics.
(Original work published in 1353).
- Byron, L. (1817) “Darkness”. <https://poets.org/poem/darkness>.
- Campbell, T. (1832) “The Last Man”. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59788/59788-h/59788-h.htm#THE_LAST_MAN.
- Camus, A. (2020). *The Plague*. Penguin Classics.
- Defoe, D. (2003). *A Journal of the Plague Year* (C. N. Manlove, Ed.). Oxford University Press.
(Original work published 1722).
- Defoe, D. (2007) (Ed. Thomas Keymer). *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, Of York, Mariner*. Oxford University Press. (Original work published in 1719).
- Druckmann, N., & Mazin, C. (Executive Producers). (2023–present). *The Last of Us* [TV series]. Sony Pictures Television.
- Estok, S. C. (2009). Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 16(2), 203–225.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/44733418>.

- Glotfelty, C. (1996). Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis. In *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (p. xviii). The University of Georgia Press.
- Mandel, E. St. J. (2014). *Station Eleven*. Alfred A Knopf.
- McCarthy, C. (2006). *The Road*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- McKay, A. (Director). (2021). *Don't Look Up* [Film]. Hyperobject Industries; Bluegrass Films; Netflix.
- Johnson, B. (1993). *The Last Man*: Apocalypse Without Millennium. *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, 258-266, Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195077407.003.0014>.
- Paley, Morton D. (2011). Introduction. In Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, 1-22, Oxford University Press.
- Paley, Morton D. (1993). *The Last Man*: Apocalypse Without Millennium. *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, 107-123, Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195077407.003.0006>.
- Parker, E. & Poland, M. (2019). Gothic Nature: An Introduction. Gothic Nature. *Gothic Nature: New Directions in Ecobhorror and the EcoGothic*, 1, 1-20.
<https://gothicnaturejournal.com/issue-1/>.
- Plumwood, Val. (2003). *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge.
- Shelley, M. (2008). *The Last Man* (M. D. Paley, Ed.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1826).
- Shiva, Vandana. (1998). *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*. Kali for Women.
- Smith, A., & Hughes, W. (2013). Introduction: defining the ecoGothic. In A. Smith & W. Hughes (Eds.), *EcoGothic*, 1–14. Manchester University Press.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt18mvk5r.5>.
- Warren, Karen. (2000). *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What it is and Why it Matters*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.



Four Discourses, Four Subjects: Tracing Subjectivity and Desire in Tagore's *Chaturanga*

Tiyas Mondal

Independent Researcher
Kolkata, West Bengal, India.
Email: tiyased@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the dynamics of subjectivity and desire in Rabindranath Tagore's *Chaturanga* through the theoretical framework of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Structured around four central figures, the novel presents four distinct ideological and existential positions that engage with questions of desire, knowledge, and authority. Drawing on Jacques Lacan's theory of the four discourses, this paper interprets these characters as embodying different configurations of subjectivity produced through specific discursive structures. Through a close reading of the text, the study explores how ideological authority, spiritual rebellion, rational mediation, and disruptive desire interact within the narrative to reveal the instability of any singular claim to truth. Along with ideological assertions, this paper closely focuses on moments of rupture that reveal the subjects as an excess of ideology. By situating *Chaturanga* within a Lacanian framework, the paper argues that Tagore's novella anticipates a modern understanding of subjectivity as fractured, relational, and constituted through precarity rather than apodictic stability.



Received: 25.03..2026

Accepted: 02.06.2026

Published: 15.06.2026

CJHSSC, Volume: 2

Issue: 1, June 2026

Page: 87 - 98

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20680248>

Copyright: Author © 2026



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Published by: Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College,
Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

Available at: www.ssjalangirlscollege.org.in/journal.php
Email: confluence.sjgc@gmail.com

Keywords: Subjectivity, Tagore, Lacan, desire, discourse.

Introduction

The publication of Tagore's *Chaturanga* in 1916 marks a time of great socio-historical turbulence. With the advent of modernism in Europe, established notions about the human mind were largely being scrutinized and reinterpreted. This had a substantial effect on literature in particular. A radical transmutation of the ideological bedrock of 20th-century Europe had an unavoidable effect on the subsequent liquidation of traditional semblances of reality. Fredric Jameson repeatedly uses the term 'rationalization' to explain this phenomenon:

For the dynamic of rationalization - Weber's term, which Lukács will strategically retranslate as reification in *History and Class Consciousness* - is a complex one in which the traditional or "natural" [naturwüchsige] unities, social forms, human relations, cultural events, even religious systems, are systematically broken up in order to be reconstructed more efficiently, in the form of new post-natural processes or mechanisms (Jameson, 1983, pp. 47-48).

Although 20th-century Bengal was a landscape far away from continental unrest, philosophical ideas such as rationalism, positivism, and the Bengal Renaissance found profound expression through religious reforms and the formation of new Bengali intellectual cohorts. Tagore was well aware of these new emerging maxims. While answering a question regarding the novel *Chaturanga*, Tagore stated the following:

To the authors of yesteryears, life meant desire and frustration, union and separation, birth and death, and certain other similarly imprecise events [...] Since a few days now, our impression of our life has been changing—it seems we were so long loitering about the entrance—after a long time we seem to have discovered the way to the inner chambers for the first time. We are awake at the outer side of our consciousness—there we are consciously fighting battles, striking others and are being struck by others. But within these strikes and counterstrikes, these ups and downs, something is being created in our ignorance of it. The arena for that gigantic game of creation is our submerged consciousness. It is a new world, as if gradually coming into existence before us (Nag, as cited in Biswas, 2003, p. 718).

Tagore's reflection on creation as an effect of our submerged consciousness is a crucial insight that precipitates a broader psychoanalytic discussion regarding subjectivity and its complex relation with socio-ideological structures. Lacanian psychoanalysis, in particular, is rich with

complex theoretical ideas regarding ideology, society, and the problematic (im)possibility of the emergence of the subject. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the subject is “a being-of-language (parlêtre, to use Lacan's condensed writing). The subject is always fastened, pinned, to a signifier which represents him for the other, and through this pinning he is loaded with a symbolic mandate, he is given a place in the inter subjective network of symbolic relations” (Žižek, 2008, p.125). This inter subjective symbolic network of relations is purely “performative, it cannot be accounted for by reference to the 'real' properties and capacities of the subject” (Žižek, 2008, p.126). Initially, Lacan's idea of the subject and its relation to the symbolic network of causality resonates with the narrow determinism of Structuralism. For Structuralism, the subject has always existed as a meagre epiphenomenon of some structural discourse. Lacan's statement that the “signifier is what represents the subject to another signifier” (Lacan, 2006, p. 694) is not directed towards subsuming the subject within the mire of the Symbolic but to reinstate the true kernel of the subject to be decentred from the symbolic chain of causality itself. In his seminar XVII, titled *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan proposed a diagrammatic model of subjectivity and its relation to social structures through his model of the four discourses. Lacan describes the discourse as “a necessary structure that goes well beyond speech, which is always more or less occasional” (Lacan, 2007, p.12). The four “matheme(s)” of the structure are important for understanding the basic mechanisms of the four discourses. Firstly, S1 is the master-signifier or “the signifier function that the essence of the master relies upon” (Lacan, 2007, p. 21). In the dispersed chain of signifiers, the “point de capiton is the point through which the subject is 'sewn' to the signifier, and at the same time the point which interpellates individual into subject by addressing it with the call of a certain master-signifier[...]in a word, it is the point of the subjectivation of the signifier's chain” (Žižek, 2008, p. 112). So, it is not only the master but also the subject who relies on the master signifier for their ontological essence. It is through this subtle indication that Lacan implies that both the subject and the master of the symbolic network are marked by an inherent lack. The position of the ‘agent’ in the discourse structure is thus always marked by an intrinsic velleity. The matheme called knowledge (S2) is an *a priori* field of information that “arises at the moment at which S1 comes to represent something...” (Lacan, 2007, p. 12). Lacan also mentions that if “there is knowledge that is not known[...]it is instituted at the level of S2, which is the one I call the other signifier. This other signifier is not alone. The stomach of the Other, the big Other, is full of them” (Lacan, 2007, p. 33). The Lacanian notion of the big Other is the order of the signifier in the symbolic network. The big Other is the final support of the symbolic network as well as the guarantor of the subject's symbolic identity. Lacan, hereby, designates his famous duality of desire and jouissance. Desire is only possible

within the limits of the symbolic order itself. As far as the subject's desire is confined within the symbolic order of the big Other, it is easy to understand why Lacan said that desire is the desire of the Other. In Seminar XI, Lacan said: "The dialectic of the object of desire, in so far as it creates the link between the desire of the subject and the desire of the Other – I have been telling you a long time now that it is one and the same" (Lacan, 1981, p. 215). What is the nature of this 'object of desire'? Or, more importantly, what is the property of this object that connects the subject to the Other? The enigmatic property of this phantasmatic 'object of desire' is nothing but a cover of the lack in the Other. The 'object of desire' is produced as a cover of an inherent lack that characterises both the subject and the Other. The subject, in Lacanian discourse, is thus constitutively disjointed from the symbolic order itself. In this regard, the subject is always "constituted through a certain misrecognition: the process of ideological interpellation through which the subject 'recognizes' itself as the addressee in the calling up of the ideological cause implies necessarily a certain short circuit, an illusion of the type 'I was already there'..." (Žižek, 2008, p. xxv). Ideological interpellation is only a way for the subject "to misrecognize his radical dependence on the big Other, on the symbolic order as his decentred cause" (Žižek, 2008, p. 116). Along these lines, this paper shows how the four characters in Tagore's novel *Chaturanga* form distinct subjective positions within the intricate matrix of the narrative. Evaluating the individual positions of these characters, this paper will attempt to resolve the enigmatic nexus that binds them together in a restless conjugation of attraction and disillusionment.

Four Discourses, Four Subjects

Tagore's novel *Chaturanga* comprises four chapters that present four narratives about four characters and their inter-subjective involvement in events of crisis and resolution. The four main characters – Jyathamoshai, Sachish, Sribilas, and Damini – are embroiled in the socio-ideological tapestry of 20th-century Bengal. The character of Jyathamoshai (Jagmohan) is that of a rationalist. He believes in "no-God" (Tagore, 2005, p. 859). While Jyathamoshai (Jagmohan) is a staunch atheist, his brother Harimohan (Sachish's father) is a Brahmin. Tagore's delineation of the ideological rift between the two brothers extends far into the macrocosmic dimension of the narrative's social space. Jyathamoshai, known as "Bengal's Dr. Johnson" (Tagore, 2005, p. 861), is a purveyor of Western intellect.

Jagmohan's non-conformist position makes him an Other in his traditional Brahmin household. He increasingly attracts reprehension and public condemnation for his opinions and actions. The

growing antagonism between the two brothers culminates in Jagmohan's eviction from his own home. Harimohan's hegemonic infiltration of Jagmohan's private space must not be seen as intrasocial conflict. Hegemony is not only a forceful extension of ideological interest over the Other. It is also a way to hide the structural negativity of ideology itself. Žižek writes: "The key feature of the concept of hegemony lies in the contingent connection between intrasocial differences and the limit that separates society from non-society – the limit between social and its exteriority, the non-social can articulate itself only in the guise of a difference between elements of social space" (Žižek, 2000, p. 92). The figures of the Muslim tanners and the widowed Nonibala reflect the Other or the abject of ideology. It is through the exclusion of this 'non-society' that ideology generates the illusion of self-enclosing itself. Although this Otherness appears to be a radically different exteriority, it is actually the most intimate and disavowed part of the subject. Lacan posits this hostility as a reaction against our encounter with jouissance. Zupančič writes:

Jouissance is by its very definition "strange," "other," "dissimilar." However, the important point there is that I do not experience jouissance as "strange" and "dissimilar" because it is the jouissance of the Other, but, on the contrary, that it is because of this jouissance that I perceive my neighbor as (radically) Other and "strange." Moreover, it is not simply the jouissance of the neighbor, of the other, that is strange to me. The kernel of the problem is that I experience my own jouissance as strange, dissimilar, other, and hostile. "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" compels me to love "that most neighborly of neighbors who is inside me," my jouissance (Zupančič, 1998, pp. 43-44).

Jouissance is that intimate part of the subject that cannot be integrated into the Symbolic space. It is a strange body inside the subject, but also points towards radical exteriority, for which Lacan coined a new term, "extimité" (Žižek, 2008, p. 204). To avoid the traumatic dimension of his own jouissance, the subject undergoes ideological interpellation and misrecognises himself within the wider chain of the big Other. Through this fantasy formation, "jouissance is domesticated, gentrified" (Žižek, 2008, pp. 138-39). Harimohan's feverish attempts (appealing in court against Jagmohan's atheism, depriving him of their family trusteeship, forcing him away from their ancestral home, denigrating his death as a punishment for sin) to condemn Jyathamoshai are expressions of anxiety and antagonism arising from the failure of gentrifying jouissance. Harimohan's strident proclivity also extends towards another key character of the novel –

Sachish. Despite being Harimohan's son, Sachish's character could not be more antithetical to him. Being tutored by Jagmohan, he harbours all the rational and atheistic maxims that also define Jyathamoshai's disposition. Sachish opposes Brahminical orthodoxy, empathises with the Muslim tanners, proposes to marry the widowed Nonibala, and is also said to be the favourite student of Professor Wilkins from his college. Many of his classmates scornfully assert that Sachish has beguiled their professor by "showing off his atheism" (Tagore, 2005, p. 858). However, Sachish's impression of being an autonomous and self-reflective intellectual imbued with Western progressive philosophy is shown to be heavily reductive. Far from being the purveyor of neutral knowledge, Sachish's existential disposition is framed within the complex rubric of an ideological matrix that problematises his character. The complexity of his psychic state transpires after the death of Jyathamoshai. "Just as the light of a lamp put out by a puff of breath vanishes instantly, after Jagmohan's death, Sachish disappeared – we didn't know where", Sribilas recounts (Tagore, 2005, p. 889). Sachish's apparent disappearance following Jagmohan's death marks a decisive moment within the structure of the narrative. What collapses here is not merely a personal relationship but the symbolic support that sustained Sachish's intellectual identity. Lacan's discourse of the University provides a useful framework to understand this crisis. In the University discourse, knowledge (S2) occupies the position of the agent – presenting itself as objective and autonomous – while its hidden truth remains the master-signifier (S1) that authorizes it. As explained in the introductory part of the essay, the subject's dependency on the big Other is structural, and his position in the chain of the signifiers is contingent. Sachish's intellectualism, shaped under the influence of Jagmohan, thus appears less as an expression of independent rational thought than as a discursive position sustained by a concealed master-signifier. With Jagmohan's death, this hidden support collapses, producing a moment of subjective destitution in which the symbolic coordinates that organized Sachish's identity begin to disintegrate. Lacan mentions his idea of 'subjective destitution' as a state where "the subject no longer presupposes himself as a subject [...] he assumes not the existence but the non-existence of the big Other, he accepts the Real in its utter, meaningless idiocy; he keeps open the gap between the Real and its symbolization" (Žižek, 2008, p. 263). Sachish maintains his dissociated state of existence through his restless oscillations between being 'destituted' and being under the aegis of a guru named Leelananda Swami. After his disappearance, Sribilas tries to find him and discovers that he is in Chittagong "dancing, singing, playing cymbals, and rousing whole neighbourhoods into a state of excitement" (Tagore, 2005, p. 891). Sachish's transition from rationalist to disciple of a Swami could not be more radical. Sribilas rightfully worries that he would lose face and that many would claim that they knew "there was no real

substance to Sachis; he was all empty theory” (Tagore, 2005, p. 891). All these accusations are factual and predictable; however, they are not in the right spectrum. Sachish exemplifies the fact that theories are indeed empty, as the substance that functions as their bulwark contains a fundamental lack. As explained in the introductory section, the subject and the substance coincide in the fundamental lack that runs through both. Thus, Sachish’s staunch disposition of being an atheist could not be sustained after the big Other’s (Jyathamoshai) liquidation, just as his initial state of destitution could not be sustained, and he had to move towards replacing the master figure of Jyathamoshai with that of Leelananda Swami. The Swami’s hectoring remarks to Sribilas concretise this fact. After learning that Sribilas has won the Premchand-Raychand scholarship, he says:

. . . the diver has to go down to the seabed to look for pearls, but it’s fatal to get stuck there, so he comes gasping to the surface to save his life. If you want salvation, you must leave the floor of the ocean of knowledge and come to the shore. You have won the Premchand-Raychand *scholarship*[emphasis added], now look to the Premchand-Raychand *renunciationship*! [emphasis added](Tagore, 2005, p. 894).

Sachish’s strange shift to the absolute obverse of his previous beliefs nauseates Sribilas. His disconcertion reaches its apogee when the Swami “stretched out his legs towards Sachish, who began slowly massaging them”(Tagore, 2005, p. 894). Sribilas fails to ratiocinate about his friend’s metamorphosis and gradually allows himself to get interpellated into the Symbolic structure of mysticism as well. After Sribilas finds himself inside the ideological matrix, the strangeness of jouissance finds its symbolisation, and he sees “Sachish assume an other-worldly form that could only be that of a *god* [emphasis added]” (Tagore, 2005, p. 897). In his seminar *Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge* (1972–1973), Lacan creates an interesting topology that establishes a synergy between God and jouissance féminine. Reflections on that seminar become very pertinent to this line of discussion, as Sachish’s apparent ‘god-like’ disposition will disintegrate with the introduction of the feminine character of Damini.

Ideology, non-all and the jouissance féminine

Jacques Lacan, in his seminar *Encore*, introduces two key ideas – the notion of jouissance féminine and the fact that there is no sexual relationship. As has already been discussed, the subject is fundamentally castrated through his entry into the Symbolic chain of signifiers. As a

‘being of language’, he becomes utterly foreign to his own jouissance. “Castration means that jouissance must be refused so that it can be reached on the inverted ladder of the Law of desire”, Žižek writes (Žižek, 1994, p. 97). From his notion of castration, Lacan constructs his disquisition of the phallic signifier. He asserts that the phallic signifier is one of the master signifiers that sustains the Symbolic matrix. However, as has already been discussed, the Symbolic is thoroughly inconsistent, and the primary defense of every ideology is to evacuate or domesticate its disturbing excess called jouissance. Just as Sachish’s father attempted to evict Jyathamoshai, Nonibala, and the Muslim tanners from their property (metaphor for a space of ideological containment), Sachish would also attempt the same with the widowed Damini. However, unlike Nonibala, Damini is presented as a markedly assertive character who challenges and subverts the phallocentric nature of orthodox Brahminism. Sribilas narrates Damini’s subversive nature:

Damini didn’t dress like a widow; then, she would pointedly ignore the guru’s instructions; and finally she showed no hint of the radiance of *ascetic purity*[my emphasis] that lights up body and soul through being close to such a great man. Everybody voiced the same opinion: ‘Some creature indeed! We have seen a lot, but such a woman – never!’ (Tagore, 2005, p. 904).

Damini’s defiance of the Swami’s orders debilitates his position as the master, and Damini becomes a strange ‘creature’ who is foreign to their ideological rubric. Damini’s disposition is consolidated when she asserts her provision of being able to make her own decisions:

‘We have decided to pay for you to live with some female relative’, Sachish said.

‘*You* have decided?’

‘Yes’

‘*I haven’t* [my emphasis]’ (Tagore, 2005, p. 928)

Damini thus defies the masculine injunction of being the subservient widow, and here lies the enigma that disenchant both Sribilas and Sachish. However, there is also a spectral dimension of Damini that exists inside them. Feminine jouissance – the dark, disturbing limit of phallic ideology – is a radical negative that is irrevocable. Damini’s insistence on going along with Leelananda Swami, Sachish, and Sribilas consolidates this insight. In one episode, the Swami plans to go to a far-off place with Sachish and Sribilas without Damini. However, “Damini wasn’t to be put off; she came along” (Tagore, 2005, p. 908). After wandering all day, they came across a cave with ancient rock carvings. “Whether these were Hindu or Buddhist, whether the

figures were of Buddha or Krishna, whether their craftsmanship betrayed Greek influence, these were contentious issues among scholars”, Sribilas recounts (Tagore, 2005, p. 909). The confluence of different cultural constructs – at once familiar and at once ‘Greek’ – invokes the cave as an enigmatic problem of symbolic representation. They, too, consider the cave something out of the Symbolic and alien to civilisation. “We were supposed to return to human habitation after seeing the cave”, Sribilas asserts. One of the most striking facts of this episode is that Damini – despite accompanying them all along – is wholly absent from this part of the narrative. It is as if the ancient enigma of the cave has absorbed her in its mires. It is as if the cave becomes the agitating embodiment of her *jouissance féminine*. The following events with Sribilas concretise this insight. He describes the cave as “a black beast – its moist breath seemed to touch my skin. It seemed to me like the first animal to appear in the very first cycle of creation; it had no eyes, no ears, only a huge appetite” (Tagore, 2005, p. 910). Sribilas’s description of the cave bears an uncanny resemblance to the Lacanian notion of the presymbolic, amorphous essence of pure libido, called ‘lamella’. It is the most intimate part of the subject that is ‘in him more than himself,’ yet it is an “amorphous intruder of infinite plasticity, an undead alien monster, who can never be pinned down to a determinate form” (Žižek, 2016, p. 183). Freud also mentions this motif in Chapter 4 of *Beyond Pleasure Principle*, where he refers to the “little fragment of living substance [...] suspended in the middle of an external world charged with the most powerful energies”(Freud, 1961, p. 21). This ‘energy’ of *jouissance* puts Sribilas into a state of catatonia. He feels as if “the primordial beast had thrust me deep into its saliva-drenched maw [...] its saliva was acidic, it would corrode me” (Tagore, 2005, p. 912). Sribilas is “speechless with fear and loathing” (Tagore, 2005, p. 912). Deprived of speech, he feels powerless as he is unable to pin down *jouissance* with a signifier in language. The ‘creature’ holds on to his feet as he tries to kick it away. The feet are a fetishistic extension of the phallus qua the phallic signifier of the castrated subject. Thus, Sribilas’s feeling of being ‘corroded’ and powerless becomes pertinent. Although the creature is described as ‘hairless’, Sribilas finds a “mass of hair” (Tagore, 2005, p. 912) on his bed, which indubitably points towards the pubic hair, which acts as a fetishistic disavowal of the fact that women are beyond the phallic principle of sexuality. The mass of hair remains as a ‘little piece of the Real’ to announce the structural negativity at the heart of the Symbolic. The fact that Tagore decides to break the usual flow of the narration, where Sribilas recounts all events as the main narrator, exerts the sheer senseless intensity of the cave episode. This portion of the narrative remains as a suspended witness of *jouissance féminine* as the “ineffable ‘dark continent’ separated from (the male) discourse by a frontier that is impossible to traverse” (Žižek, 1994, p. 151).

Contingency: Between the Hysteric and the Transcendental

After returning from the cave, Damini's corporeal self also returns to the fabric of the narrative. Her disposition of being assertive and subversive also remains unchanged. However, it becomes increasingly more contingent and irregular. Damini develops a contorted relationship with both Sribilas and Sachish. She uses Sribilas to attract Sachish's attention. Sribilas is aware of it as he describes his relation with Damini as a reminder of "the day Guruji had asked Sachish in my presence to prepare the hookah" (Tagore, 2005, p. 922). Sribilas reduces his disposition as a conduit between Damini's hysterical contact with Sachish. The term 'hysterical' does not so much carry the same denigrating intonation in Lacanian psychoanalysis as it does in other fields of literary theory. In Lacan, the hysteric is a subject whose "very existence involves radical doubt and questioning" (Žižek, 1998, p. 81). Damini's attempt to provoke Sachish by her unwarranted solicitation of Sribilas is a very pertinent expression of it. Damini's actions confuse and disconcert both Sachish and Sribilas to the extent that Sachish asks Sribilas to sever his contact with Damini. When Sribilas refuses, Sachish leaves their dwelling. After Sachish's departure, Damini discards Sribilas. "Damini stopped asking me to read; nor did she need me for anything else", he recounts (Tagore, 2005, p. 935). Damini's provocation of Sachish qua masculine authority has to be seen as the hysteric's attempt to "provoke her Master in an ambiguous way which can also be read as the demand for a more authentic real Master" (Žižek, *Disparities*, 2016, p. 191). Damini's position of subversion is shown to have an obverse side that requires a master figure. Like Sachish, Damini also follows the ideological mandate to find a master figure for Symbolic anchorage. Thus, after the return of Sachish, Damini bows and touches his feet, saying "I am yours to command" (Tagore, 2005, p. 936). Damini's disposition of defiance only takes her from Leelananda Swami (old master) to Sachish (new master). Her insistent plea to Sachish concretises this insight: "I have got nothing from your guru. He hasn't been able to calm my restless mind even for a moment [...] Save me! If anybody can save me it's you" (Tagore, 2005, p. 942). Sachish – on the other hand – gradually grows out of his disposition of being the Swami's disciple. "The earth had girded up her loins to destroy the paradise of ecstasy in which Guruji had tried to keep us cloistered", Sribilas notes. The ideological rubric of the Guru's 'cloister' is liquidating while Sachish has become like "a kite whose string had just snapped" and despite showing no neglect to devotion, Sribilas knows that "inwardly he was faltering" (Tagore, 2005, p. 929). Eventually, Sachish and Sribilas leave with Damini – departing the Swami's devotional cohort. Since the death of Jyathamoshai, Sachish feels the pangs of subjective destitution for the first time again. He "had gathered himself in stillness, his mind could no

longer be kept in check. No more did he wallow in mystic contemplation of ecstatic union with the divine” (Tagore, 2005, p. 952). One day, he suddenly wanders off without any notice. Being perturbed, Damini ventures out and finds him seated by a sandbank. Tagore’s description of this scene concretises Sachish’s ‘destituted’ position:

Emptiness all around, no sign of life anywhere. The waves of sand were as pitiless as the sun – as if they were sentinels of emptiness, lying in ambush [...] Everything seemed to have dissolved into primal dry whiteness. There was nothing at her feet save a ‘No’ – no sound or motion, no trace of the red of blood, the green of plants, the blue of the sky or the brown of earth (Tagore, 2005, p. 955).

Sachish is viscerally transmuted and coalesced into this strange, atonal, and monochromatic world of emptiness. Devoid of his symbolic anchorage, Sachish is reduced to the radical negative of subjectivity that Hegel often referred to as the “night of the world” (Žižek, 2016, p. 336). In a very peculiar turn of events, Sachish acquires transcendence not through his submission to the master figure of a guru but by being absolved of it. It is through his ‘destitution’ that he acquires his true decenterment and becomes the empty/substanceless “transcendental subject” (Zupančič, 2000, p. ix). After Sachish, Sribilas, and Damini also consolidate their subjective disposition through the most socially recognisable act – marriage. Damini’s disruptive status and her uncanny figuration, which defined the cave episode, are largely subsumed under the canopy of desire. Sribilas proposes to marry Damini. Sribilas exerts his feeling as if “The line, ‘ At your footsteps the noose of love tightens round my soul’, was like a flame showering sparks in all directions”(Tagore, 2005, p. 971). Sribilas finds his Imaginary reconciliation through the symbolic act of ‘love,’ which is sublimation par excellence. By reducing Damini as an object of his desire, he domesticates the feminine jouissance and gives it meaning. Tagore does not discuss much about Sachish after the scene at the sandbank. The fact that Sachish finds himself dissociated from the Symbolic gives us an inkling as to why even Sribilas is also unable to find him and ends up referring to him as a “madcap” (Tagore, 2005, p. 973).

Conclusion

This paper has delineated the issue of subjectivity and its problematic association with ideology through the analysis of Rabindranath Tagore’s novel *Chaturanga*. With Lacanian psychoanalysis, major thematic portions have been exegetically evaluated to show that Tagore adumbrates the contours of his characters in a way that disrupts and problematizes any notion of apodictic

congruity with ideology. Rather than being enshrined in perfect homeostasis, the characters emerge as the point at which ideology qua interpellation fails. Despite sorting the inundation of ontological chaos through socially sanctioned acts, the subjects maintain their singular constancy to nothingness. It can thus be asserted, to end with Tagore's own words, that the "psyche has been created – perhaps as a jest – specially to deceive the psychologist"(Tagore, 2005, p. 970).

References

- Biswas, S. (2003). Rabindranath Tagore and Freudian thought. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 84(3), 717–732.
- Freud, S. (1961). *Beyond the pleasure principle*(J. Strachey, Ed. & Trans.). W. W. Norton & Company.
- Jameson, F. (1983). *The political unconscious*. Routledge.
- Lacan, J. (2002). *Écrits*(B. Fink, Trans.). W. W. Norton & Company.
- Lacan, J. (2007). *The seminar of Jacques Lacan: the other side of psychoanalysis* (R. Grigg, Trans.). W. W. Norton & Company.
- Tagore, R. (2005). Chaturanga(K. Haq, Trans.). In *Tagore Omnibus Volume 1* (pp. 852-979). Penguin Books.
- Žižek, S. (1994). *The metastases of enjoyment*. Verso.
- Žižek, S. (1998). Four discourses, four subjects. In S. Žižek (Ed.), *Cogito and the unconscious*(pp. 74-116). Duke University Press.
- Žižek, S. (2008). *The sublime object of ideology*. Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2016). *Disparities*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Zupančič, A. (1998). The subject of the law. In S. Žižek (Ed.), *Cogito and the unconscious* (pp. 41-73). Duke University Press.
- Zupančič, A. (2000). *Ethics of the real*. Verso.



Modernism as a Shared Emotional Structure Across Cultures: Convergences between W.H. Auden and Buddhadeva Bose

Sagnik Chakraborty

Guest Lecturer

Department of English (UG and PG)

Narasinha Dutt College, Howrah, West Bengal, India

Email: sagnikwrik07@gmail.com

Abstract

The mid-twentieth century, marked by significant changes in political, social, and cultural spheres, witnessed modernist response across culture. During this time, Europe found itself disoriented by political upheaval, the rise of fascism, and the looming threat of World War II, while in Bengal, the modernist response was rooted in colonial subjugation, communal distrust, and cultural conflicts. Hence, the modernist approach was not bound by boundaries but by the sensibilities that guided its transcending from one continent to another. Poetry can be scrutinized under three aspects: its theme, the poet's approach, and the applied structure. Despite not having any prominent interaction, contemporary mid-twentieth-century poetry across continental boundaries witnessed something that expanded the scope of discussions and study: that contemporary poets from completely different cultures were driven by the same kinds of themes, approaches, and poetic structures to shape their poetry in the modern world. In this regard, this paper analyzes two contemporary poets, W.H. Auden of Britain and Buddhadeva Bose of Bengal. It examines instances from their poems to show how their approaches overlapped and complemented one another, eventually signalling the rise of a shared transnational poetic sensibility. Both Auden and Bose sought to secularize poetry. Both poets responded to the demands of their age, moving away from the lofty, spiritualized language of their predecessors to embrace a more disillusioned, intellectually sharp, and urban-focused response. This paper, therefore, deals with a comparative study where the poetry of Auden and Bose that reflects the flow and the genuine appeal of modernist poetry in a disintegrated time does not wait for the boundaries to be erased, but its spontaneous plea gives birth to the same kind of poetic sensibility across distinct cultural contexts.



Received: 30.04..2026

Accepted: 01.06.2026

Published: 15.06.2026

CJHSSC, Volume: 2

Issue: 1, June 2026

Page: 99 - 108

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20682287>

Copyright: Author © 2026



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Published by: Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College,
Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

Available at: www.ssjalangirlscollege.org.in/journal.php
Email: confluence.ssjgc@gmail.com

Keywords: W.H.Auden, Buddhadeva Bose, Modernism, Modernist Poetry, Shared Modernity, *Adhunikata*

Introduction

The rise of modernist poetry in Bengal indicates a transformation in socio-cultural assimilation. The shift marks its beginning in the last two decades of Tagore, from which it has since transcended into the later poets like Jibanananda Das, Sudhindranath Dutta, Amiya Chakraborty, Bishnu Dey, Achintya Kumar Sengupta, Ajit Dutta, Buddhadeva Bose, and several others. These poets depart from traditional Bengali poetic forms, adopting a more fragmented and dynamic style. Among them, Buddhadeva Bose, who embraced *Kallol Era's* actual appeal, emerged as the central figure in reshaping Bengali poetry, as his modernism represented a radical shift in Bengali poetic consciousness. Though belonging to different socio-political contexts and adopting different writing approaches, it was widely accepted that Tagore's poetic legacy lay with him. When W.H. Auden began to flourish with his modernist sensibilities and to establish a versatile and unique craftsmanship widely termed 'Audenesque', in Bengal, a similar impulse was found in Buddhadeva Bose, who attempted to shift poetry toward social, psychological, and clinical precision. Therefore, this article draws on comparative modernist scholarship that considers modernism a literary spontaneity of time that is independent of culture and not entirely Western. The synchronous rapid move toward modernist technique, often ignored as a parallel stream of modernist response, was a unique move toward a fit with the appeal of the modern world.

Convergence between Auden and Bose

Both Auden and Bose rejected the pastoral as a site of truth. They were able to shape their poetry "...as a hygiene, a knowledge and practice, based on brilliantly prejudiced analysis of contemporary disorders" (Thomas, 1937). For Bose, who finds lyricism in urban chaos, in routine, noise, and fragmentation, the image of a modern city is a dynamic embodiment of modern existence itself. In his poem, *Brishti Ar Jhor* (Rain and Wind), he writes, "*Bodyless skeletonless Calcutta, filled with shadows; like dreams, / autocratic, irresponsible. I, too, am a shadow, quivering on the wall/ behind the curtain at the touch of the wind; in my heart sway/ rain and wind, rain and wind, night and day.*" He suggests a city defined by shadows and internal weather, aligned perfectly with the high modernist movement's obsession with urban alienation. The city exists much in the mind as in reality, as it is unreal, elusive, and psychologically constructed, and "*Filled with shadows, like dreams.*" Again, when Auden writes, "Where blind skyscrapers use/ their full height to proclaim/ The strength of Collective Man" (September 1, 1939), he dehumanizes the 'city'. The city's most visible structures are paradoxically unseen. Instead of representing the urban structures as mere

materialistic layouts, they became symbols of abstraction and alienation. Calcutta has no 'body'; the skyscrapers of New York do not see: the city is dehumanized in both. Auden's urban imagery parallels Bose's deconstruction of the city. The poem's setting, "*a dive on the Fifty-second Street*" in the USA, is not rendered as a concrete, mimetic space. Rather, it becomes a symbolic and psychological landscape populated by abstractions: "*the clear hopes expire*", "*the low dishonest decade*", "*waves of anger and fear*." The city here, like Buddhadeva Bose's "Calcutta", loses its material specificity and becomes a floating signifier for modern alienation and collective anxiety. Auden, in "As I Walked Out One Evening", places the narrator among "*The crowds upon the pavement*" and the whirring of the clock, like Bose's "*Crowds on the streets, bustling, fervent*." Bose's expression of *rain and wind* swaying in his heart echoes "*The glacier knocks in the cupboard, / The desert sighs in the bed*" in terms of describing a hollowed-out internal state by using physical and external imagery. The external environment and material things become inner conditions: restless, futile, and inescapable. Modernism is defined by the paradox of being psychologically surrounded by millions while remaining spiritually alone. The speaker, in Bose, becomes a '*shadow*', losing a solid sense of identity and becoming as insubstantial as the city itself. Similarly, Auden's poem ends with the lovers gone and the clocks silent, leaving only the '*deep river*' running on: a sense of individual dissolving into a vast, indifferent city.

Buddhadeva Bose's attempt to implement solitude amidst noise reflects the Bengali '*Manas*'- the interior mind, trying to find its footing in a rapidly industrializing Calcutta. He is prescriptive and rebellious. He warns against the false collective: "*Those who smile and chant in tune with tinkling tea-cups/ Become, when the night is late, and neighbours' lights are out, / Cockroaches...*" (Sonnets For 3 A.M.). This grotesque imagery exposes the dehumanization of conformity, something Auden, who takes a more satirical, Western approach to this, implies but does not visualize so viscerally. Auden's poem "The Unknown Citizen" describes a man who is identified only by his institution. In this regard, the man becomes a collection of mere facts. The state celebrates him because he conforms perfectly. He is the "*One against whom there was no official complaint*." Auden's citizen is perfectly recorded and well archived. This is the exact opposite of Bose, who offers an alternative: "*Leave no address./ Like spring in the blank December*" and "*Go far, to distant lands where nobody speaks your tongue,/ And you wander uncertain, anonymous*" (Sonnets for 3 A.M.). Auden, through his poem, exposes the tragedy of a man reduced to statistics in *bureaucratic modernity*, while Bose offers a counter vision in which the self withdraws from every social, institutional, or even linguistic system to preserve its inner sanctity. Auden discloses the invisibility of inner life when Bose considers the inner life to be the sole reality to be saved. In

short, both poets are responding to the same fundamental problem, which modernity tends to wipe out or alter- the true human individual form. Like Auden's poem, Bose begins with the same realization: "*Only the personal is holy.*" The only differences are in their tones and the ways they address their thematic concerns. This assertion by Buddhadeva Bose serves as a manifesto against the encroaching noise of the twentieth century. It marks a bold leap towards modernism, wherein meaning retreats from public forms to subjectivity. Buddhadeva Bose's imagery of "*The shaded lamp*", "*The yellowed page*", and the intimate act of writing "*to a distant friend*" constructs what may be called an interior cartography, where time coexists with permanence. Auden's declaration, "*All I have is a voice/ To undo the folded lie,*" (September 1, 1939) foregrounds individual conscience as the last site of resistance against collective falsehood. In this poem, Auden shifts the focus from external political events to the individual's inner moral state, paralleling Bose's movement toward the inexpressible beyond materiality. Thus, through both poets, the world becomes merely a surface, beneath which lies the search for transcendence that remains unresolved yet profoundly human.

Another significant area of convergence lies in the perception of love and desire. Traditional romantic poetry often glorifies love as eternal and transcendent. However, both Bose and Auden challenge this notion; instead, love in their poems appears temporary, contingent, and inevitably bound up with the intricacies of the modern self. The poem's conception of love is tender and ironic in nature, far away from romantic illusion. "Lullaby" dismantles the traditional ideal of eternal beauty. The beloved is "*mortal, guilty*", and subject to decay and death. Yet, paradoxically, "*The entirely beautiful.*" Hence, love is not blind idealization; it is a conscious act of acceptance. This juxtaposition of imperfection and affection reflects a modernist sensibility that defines love as not elevated into the realm of the divine but as firmly rooted in human fallibility. For Auden, love is sudden, intense, but ultimately momentary: "*But in my arms till the break of day.*" Similarly, in Bose's lines: "*Eyes meet eyes once.../ much delight and a touch of surprise, / a leap of wild hope:/ -Nothing more.*" (This Is All). Then Bose moves quickly from desire to finality: "*Pleasure and pain, a few words, desire and sorrow, / then death's night, it's darkness.*" This pairing reveals the dual nature of love as both fulfilling and distressing, reflecting Auden. Auden also echoes the inevitability: "*Time and fevers burn away/ Individual beauty*". The poets underscore that the value of love derives precisely from its impermanence and vulnerability. Bose expands a simple glance into a cosmic vision involving "*the faces of many stars*" and "*a slice of the moon*", only to collapse it back into nothing more. Auden follows a comparable trajectory, moving from the intimate embrace of lovers to a vision of "*universal love and hope*" before returning to constraints of time and

reality. This contraction reflects the modernist tendency to juxtapose the infinite with the finite, ultimately reaffirming human limitation.

Auden adopts an almost prosaic rhythm in his “September 1, 1939”, which meanders inconsistently, veering from introspective contemplation to objective observations: *“I sit in one of the dives/ On Fifty-second Street.”* The rhythm is not lyrical. It seems cautious and disjointed, an existence oppressed by the threat of war. Again, in “The Unknown Citizen”, the rhythm mimics bureaucratic language that is deliberately flat and monotonous: *“He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be/One against whom there was no official complaint.”* Does it sound like a poem or a lyric? No. Rather, it sounds like a plain statement or a straightforward report. This rhythmic dryness echoes the system-driven, mechanical modern world, where the rhythm is inconsistent—sometimes regular, sometimes irregular, and sometimes a mixture of both. Again Bose, in “Calcutta”, describes how *“despair has robbed...[his] breast of speech.”* His despairing state of mind forces him to shape his lines discontinuously, echoing the chaotic pulse of the modern city, which was *“matchless”* once. Rhythm here becomes an extension of experience. It no longer soothes but disturbs. Irregularity is not stylish but existential. In both Auden and Bose, the voice often oscillates. In Auden’s “In Memory of W.B. Yeats”, the voice shifts across sections: from elegiac mourning, *“He disappeared in the dead of winter:/ The books were frozen, the airports almost deserted,”* to philosophical reflection when he writes, *“For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives/ In the valley of its making where executives/ Would never want to temper.”* Then, when the readers read *“Follow, poet, follow right/ To the bottom of the night, / With your unconstraining voice/ Still persuade us to rejoice”*, they find the poet’s attempt to shift the voice to public exhortation to appeal to the poet’s role as a guide through the ‘night’ of human history. Similarly, in the poem “Calcutta” by Buddhadeva Bose, the voice oscillates between reminiscing about the city’s past aura and observing as a detached critic, which makes the poet eventually announce, *“Perhaps I’ll have to say goodbye to you one day. /No regrets either.”* Further, the voice shifts to appealing for a reshaping of the city as the poet cries, *“How much more must you be destroyed, to be born again?”* The voice is authentic and expressive of a coherent self. It does not assert authority, but it emerges as a necessary medium for expressing the occurrences, transformations, and crises of the modern world. This oscillation of the voice accompanies the rhythm that mimics the poet’s uneven tone to capture his overwhelmed yet fluctuating emotion associated with the city.

Modernist poetry often thrives on ambiguity, revealing a world where certainty is no longer possible. In “The Secret Agent”, one of Auden’s unrhymed sonnets, the conventions of

setting up an argument or context are followed in the first two quartets. Nevertheless, the sestet provides anything but a solution. Two entirely opposed settings, *“the street music”* and *“the desert/the dark”*, and themes, namely the desired lover and the expected death, remain in a state of suspension. Auden’s famous line from “September 1, 1939”, *“We must love one another or die”*, appears to offer a stark, almost apocalyptic moral binary. Yet the tone is deeply ambiguous. It hovers between sincerity and irony. “Love” is an ethical choice, and death can be regarded as a consequence of moral failure. Therefore, the line can be interpreted as both a desperate choice and a critique of simplistic moral solutions. In the later editions, Auden replaces ‘or’ with ‘and’, adding a nihilistic tone to the statement. Further ambiguity is found in the previous lines: *“There is no such thing as the State/ And no one exists alone;/ Hunger allows no choice/ To the citizen or the police.”* This points out that opposing ideas can coexist and operate simultaneously. This ambiguity reflects the ethical confusion of modernity, where romantic impulse is constantly undercut by modern cynicism. Similarly, Bose’s ambiguity operates at multiple levels. His poetic voice creates resistant fixed meanings and instead creates a fluid space of suggestion, sensory richness, and intellectual uncertainty. His poem “This is All” from “Kanakabati” is divided into two stanzas that depict two parallel movements, each ending with the refrain *“Nothing more”*. The first movement depicts a moment of encounter: *“Eyes meet eyes once in an open window-/ much delight and a touch of surprise, / a leap of wild hope.”* The language is delicate and evocative, capturing the spontaneity of human emotion. However, when it feels like the beginning of love, it is immediately dismissed. The day *“waned, burnt by the fierce sun”*, and *“mists of dream gather in the mind’s skies.”* The shift from clarity to vagueness indicates how quickly reality dissolves into illusion. Then comes the refrain *“Nothing more,”* which abruptly cuts off the emotional buildup. On one hand, this suggests disillusionment, reducing the emotional intensity of the encounter to a trivial incident.

On the other hand, it indicates a kind of philosophical acceptance, where the poet recognizes the transient nature of human experiences without necessarily devaluing them. The second movement captures life as a whole: *“The faces of many stars, a slice of the moon, / time to sleep when one has one’s chores-/ the dew of peace.”* This evokes a quiet sense of completion and rest. This apparent serenity is soon complicated by the inclusion of *“pleasure and pain, a few words, desire and sorrow”*. Life is presented as a blending of constructing emotions, none of which are given priority or resolution. The accumulation of these elements creates a sense of fullness but also an incompleteness, as life in the modern world cannot be neatly summarized. The final line, *“then death’s night, its darkness”*, introduces what Auden comes up with a very desperate conclusion

about. Just as the moment of a romantic encounter fades into insignificance, so too does the entirety of human life culminate in darkness. Like Auden, Bose also takes a nihilistic tone through the repetition of “nothing more”. However, Bose offers no explicit answer to whether it is a minimalist recognition of life’s natural limits or not. It is this openness that defines Bose’s modernist engagement with ambiguity.

“Hilsa” by Buddhadeva Bose reflects a structural ambiguity that is central to its modernist aesthetics. The poem shifts in time and space: from monsoon landscape to a dangerous midnight fishing tour in Calcutta, where the “*smell of frying hilsa*” rises in the “*clerk’s wife’s kitchen*.” There is no smooth transition. It hovers between the aesthetic beauty of nature and harsh economic reality. “*Those who are half-naked*” appear contrasting on Padma’s bank that “*stands like a painted scene*.” While the movement from rural production to urban consumption reflects modern socio-economic realities, the poem does not resolve whether it celebrates or critiques the system behind it. For Auden, the varied use of poetic unexpectedness or incongruity appears to be at the very core of his mature tendency to make serious statements lightly and helps Auden to achieve his unique structural ambiguity. “The Shield of Achilles” alternates structurally between two contrasting worlds. One is the expected mythic, heroic vision: “*She looked over his shoulder/ For vineyards and olive trees*.” The other reflects the stark modern reality: “*A plain without a feature, bare and brown.../ An unintelligible multitude*.” This back-and-forth structure creates a structural ambiguity; the poem hovers between classical idealism and modern desolation, never fully committing to either, just like the structural tension we find in Bose’s several poems, including “Hilsa”, despite having thematic differences. In both Auden and Bose, form mirrors content. The breakdown of traditional structures reflects the disintegrated nature of modern life, reinforcing the connection between technique, theme, and the appeal of modern poetry.

In most of Auden’s early poems, frequent use of the conjunction ‘of’ creates unexpected and often illogical pairings, producing vignette-like images. These images derive their power from the absence of clear *signifieds*. Meanings remain elusive, shaped by overlapping signifiers and missing contexts. He shifts emphasis from the traditional ‘signifier-signified’ relationship as theorized by Ferdinand De Saussure toward a privileging of the signifier itself. Meaning is no longer anchored in stable concepts but emerges through the play of language. This anticipates Jacques Derrida’s idea that meaning is always deferred, never fully present. Bose also unsettles the idea that the linguistic sign is composed of a signifier and a signified, which rests on the assumption that, although arbitrary, their relationship is relatively stable within a system.

Words such as ‘rain’, ‘wind’, ‘night’, ‘city’, recur obsessively in “Rain and Wind”, but instead of pointing to definite concepts, they begin to drift across multiple psychological and emotional registers. The signifiers remain, but their signifieds become fluid and indeterminate. This instability becomes clearer when read through Derrida’s notion of ‘difference’, where meaning is not fixed but continuously and endlessly deferred through a chain of signifiers. “Rain” here does not resolve into a single meaning like sorrow or decay. Instead, it slides into other associations—sound, suffocation, monotony, urban alienation. “Night” is not merely temporal darkness but expands into existential and psychic emptiness. The repetition, “*Rain and wind, rain and wind*” and “nothing, nothing”, does not merely reinforce the meaning but rather endorses it, exposing the absence of any final transcendental signified. Meaning is constantly postponed but never fully present or complete. Again, if the readers consider “*Those to whom evil is done/ Do evil in return*” from Auden, we will find that the meaning of “evil” does not refer to a single category. Instead, it circulates across political, historical, and psychological dimensions, refusing to settle into a stable signified. The signifier “evil” floats across contexts without anchoring itself in a definitive meaning. The dissolution extends to the poetic subject itself. When Bose’s speaker declares himself a shadow, he signals the collapse of the self as a stable centre of meaning. In Saussure’s terms, the “I” would typically function as a relatively fixed signified, anchoring experience. However, here the self is indistinguishable and insubstantial from the surrounding shadows. Again, when Auden writes, “*I and the public know/ What all schoolchildren learn,*” it mirrors Bose’s “*I too am a shadow.*” The subject becomes dispersed, functioning not as a fixed signified but as a shifting position within language. Auden moves between the past, the present, and an uncertain future but never achieves temporal resolution. Time does not progress toward clarity. Rather, it loops and fragments much like the circulation of signifiers. Therefore, both contemporary poets attempt to defer meaning and operate language through ambiguity, suggestion, and dynamic interaction of signifiers rather than fixed reference.

The transformation of sensibility in both poets is inseparable from a transformation of a poetic form. The breakdown of historical continuity demands a corresponding break in literary techniques. In Bengal, the generation’s modernism emerges through a necessary negotiation with Tagore - a struggle to move beyond an overwhelming literary presence. It is not merely aesthetic rebellion but a response to a changing reality. Quite apart from any overshadowing by Tagore’s early romanticism, even some of his later works carry within them the seeds of modernist unrest. In the wake of Tagore, Jibanananda Das, and his counterparts, cut a new path in poetry. Detached from the colonial elite and the orthodox nationalist, they spoke about a generation,

imploringly drifting after famine, war, and dislocation. Their response to modernity was to deliberately introduce themes of gritty realism, unabashed eroticism, and psychological doubt that Tagore's humanist idealism avoided. The little magazines, 'Kallol', 'Pragati', and 'KaliKalam', to name a few, become sites of experimentation, where fragmentation, eroticism, and existentialism replace lyrical unity. Bose, still a student, co-edited 'Pragati', using it as a space to articulate a distinctly modernist voice. At a young age, he even provokes controversy. His works were criticized as "obscene", signalling a deliberate break from prevailing moral and aesthetic norms. While Tagore's stature remains unquestioned, young poets sought to free themselves from his overwhelming influence. This shift marked a transformation in thematic orientation. Mystical and devotional elements give way to more secular, rational, and psychologically complex ideas, which are frequently influenced by Freudian thought, almost during the time when Auden's position in Europe reflects a similar, yet differently configured, literary transition. By the time Auden began writing in the late 1920s, English poetry had already undergone the revolution of high modernism under figures like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, W.B. Yeats, etc. However, for Auden's generation, even this modernism requires renewal. Auden was highly influenced by Eliot. Auden adopts Eliot's ideas about poetry, especially in the areas that poetry should relate to earlier works, be constructed consciously for an audience, and refuse to be emotional self-expression. Also, his works move beyond Eliot and other first-generation modernists. Eliot's dense classicism and metaphysical seriousness, and Yeats' symbolic and yet aristocratic vision, seemed insufficient to capture the immediacy of the contemporary political crisis. Modernity was a crisis of institutional bureaucratization and collapsing empire, and the cold logic of late capitalism, for Auden. Therefore, as the readers notice, his landscape is shaped by the rapid expansion of Western Civilization that includes suburbs, factories, asphalt, and the rise of the managerial state. His modernity is characterized by a loss of individuality to statistics, official forms, and consumer habits as one traces in his "The Unknown Citizen". His response is deeply informed by the dread of totalitarianism and the sterile nature of modern bureaucracy. In both transitions, the younger poets experience a similar pressure, an inevitable need – the need to move beyond a dominant predecessor without denying their influence.

In this regard, Bose is highly misunderstood. He had the opportunity to remain in Tagore's proximity for only about six years, yet the depth of that association left a lasting intellectual and emotional imprint on him. Even while abroad in America, surrounded by what he describes as the finest literary works of the world, Buddhadeva Bose confessed in a letter that he was consumed by a singular longing – a "*Rabindra-trishna*" (an emotional or intellectual craving

for Rabindranath Tagore's works). This portrays that he never rejects Tagore but attempts a strategic distancing. The contemporary flow of thought was to make Tagore 'usable' rather than all-encompassing.

Conclusion

This paper argues that rather than being confined to Europe, modernism emerges as a global response to shared historical conditions. While their emphases differ, their poetic methods reveal a striking unity. Both contemporary poets possess similar viewpoints, demonstrating that modernist concerns transcend cultural boundaries. Their poems do not merely depict modern alienation; those are formally enacted through a linguistic system where meaning is perpetually unstable and dispersed. The modernist linguistic strategy they adopt becomes a weapon to break traditional rhythm and form. Their structure resists closure, mirroring the reality they seek to represent.

The convergence is not accidental but symptomatic of a broader historical moment. As modernity deepens, literature inevitably evolves to capture its complexity, abandoning linearity and certainty for fragmentation and multiplicity. In such a world, poetry must dig deeper – into language, consciousness, and into the very limits of expression. Similarly, to get beyond these poets and their respective cultures, we can name William Carlos Williams, who, driven by the moral decay and stagnation of twentieth-century America, tried to create a distinctively American poetic style based on everyday life and ordinary people.

It was inevitable for the torchbearers of the respective literary community, Auden and Bose, to respond to this necessity, crafting works that are formally experimental yet thematically resonant with disillusionment and the search for meaning. Therefore, modernism emerges not as a localized literary movement but as a transnational sensibility that arose from the needs of the age, a shared artistic response to the pressures of the twentieth century. Buddhadeva Bose's near-synchronous engagement with his modernist poetic techniques alongside W.H. Auden demonstrates how the mindset transcended geography and made poetry feel the touch of the same kind of *adbunikata*, almost contemporaneously. Their works stand as a parallel articulation of global conditions, proving that the language of modern anxiety is, at its core, universal.

References:

Blair, J. G. (1965). *The poetic art of W. H. Auden*. Princeton Legacy Library.

- Bose, B. (2011). *Rain and wind* (N. Gupta, Trans.). Parabaas.
<http://www.parabaas.com/translation/database/translations/poems/buddhadevabasu2.html> (Original work published 1940)
- Bose, B. (2011). *Sonnets for 3 A.M.* (N. Gupta, Trans.). Parabaas.
<http://www.parabaas.com/translation/database/translations/poems/buddhadevabasu2.html> (Original work published 1955)
- Cliffort, P. (2009). George O. Buddhadev Bose and translation. *Jacket Magazine*.
- Dyson, K. K. (Ed. & Trans.). (2003). *Selected poems of Buddhadeva Bose*. Oxford University Press.
- Dyson, K. K. (2008). *Remembering Buddhadeva Bose: A complete writer*. Parabaas.com
- Emig, R. (2000). *W. H. Auden: Towards a postmodern poetics*. Macmillan Press LTD.
- Firchow, P. E. (1984). W. H. Auden and the ideology of modernist poetry. *Johns Hopkins University*, 6(3/4).
- Mafruha, M. (2018, May 3). Flowers in a begging bowl: Tagore, Eliot, and Bengali modernism. *Edinburgh University Press Journals*, 13(2).
- Mendelson, E. (Ed.). (1976). *W. H. Auden: Selected poems*. Faber and Faber.
- Roy, M., & Anushruti, A. (2024, January). Modernism in Bengali poetry: A comparative study of Rabindranath Tagore and Jibanananda Das. *Star International Journal*, 12(1).
- Smith, S. (Ed.). (2004). *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*. Cambridge University Press.



Science, Myth and History: Tracing the Hindu Nationalist Discourse on Aryan Invasion Theory and its Discursive Shift with the Re-discovery of Saraswati

Akanksha Kesar

Research scholar

Department of Comparative Literature
and Translation Studies

Central University of Gujarat
Gujrat, India.

Balaji Ranganathan

Professor & HOD

Department of Comparative Literature
and Translation Studies

Central University of Gujarat
Gujrat, India.

Abstract

The inherent ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding the origin of the Aryans have engaged scholars for a long time. Rooted in philology, the 19th-century Aryan invasion theory (AIT) was challenged by the emerging scientific disciplines of archaeology, hydrology, paleontology, and genetics, which created an avenue for alternative historiography, where *Hindutva* locates itself. This paper traces the evolving Hindu nationalist engagement with the AIT and argues that the re-discovery of the Saraswati in the 1980s marked a shift in the Hindu nationalist response to the Aryan question as they adopted the language of science to challenge AIT/AMT and to advocate for the indigenous origins of the Indo-Aryans. The study outlines the colonial Hindu response to the philological construction of AIT and its implications for the Indian nation. It then analyses the arguments of neo-Hindu nationalist works from 1980 to 2019 and examines their scientific and historical positioning as they engage with evolving scientific research on the Saraswati River. In the end, the debate over the interpretation of evidence and ideological bias is evaluated to advocate for objectivity in adopting scientific research in interdisciplinary fields, fostering a constructive debate amid increasingly polemical discussion.



Received: 29.04.2026

Accepted: 02.06.2026

Published: 15.06.2026

CJHSSC, Volume: 2

Issue: 1, June 2026

Page: 109 - 123

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20705956>

Corresponding author: kesarakankasha@yahoo.com

Copyright: Author © 2026



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Published by: Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College,
Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

Available at: www.ssjalangirlscollege.org.in/journal.php

Email: confluence.ssjgc@gmail.com

Keywords: Hindu nationalism, Aryan invasion theory, Saraswati, historiography.

Introduction

The study of India's past finds its beginning in colonial Indology, which was guided by concerns of Orientalism and Imperialism. Either by acceptance or rejection, the Indian response has been shaped in reaction to Oriental studies (Thapar, 1978; Gupta, 1999), due to which it resists 'positive participation' (Chakrabarti, 2000). State modernity is also deeply tied to the colonial framework, which further impacts appropriation of colonial knowledge (Hutton, 2025, p.10). The Aryan Invasion Theory (AIT), now modified as the Aryan Migration Theory (AMT), is one such legacy that serves as a case study on how colonial scholarship played a role in the formation of contesting post-colonial nationalisms in India.

Philological constructions and archaeological challenge

In his famous lecture delivered to the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1786, William Jones, for the first time, suggested a common linguistic origin of Sanskrit and Western languages, based on their similarity, which had already been noted in earlier European records. This group of languages that came to be known as 'Indo-European' or 'Indo-Germanic' laid the foundation of comparative philology. The Asiatic Society of Calcutta, established by William Jones in 1784, undertook the project of codification of Hindu and Muslim laws, which legitimized the position of comparative philology. Jones's theory of philological resemblance of Indian and European languages was co-opted by Friedrich Schlegel for the propagation of a romantic nationalism, which associated the idea of identity and marked the beginning of the ideological appropriation of the Aryan theory. Germans fixated on philology as the major interpretative approach to the study of Indology to compete with the British, who had much better access to Indian studies because of their proximity, which in turn limited Indology to textual studies (Adluri, 2011). By appropriating the idea of Aryan people for the elevation of the Germans, Schlegel "altered Aryan from a translation of *Aryan* into a modern racial category, which immediately captured the imagination of his contemporaries" (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011, p. 448). Max Müller, whose politicization of the AIT contributed to the development of majoritarian identity discourse in India and Germany (Roy, 2016). Müller's use of the word 'race' to denote Aryans gave rise to the theory of the Indo-European or Aryans as a racial category. Conjectures on the original home of the Aryans in comparative philology laid the foundation of identitarian politics that came to be associated with the AIT.

By the 19th century, the term ‘Aryans’ had accumulated a certain corpus of ideas which associated it with intellectual superiority, high character, progressive development, and world domination, and Sanskrit literature came to be identified with a superior cultural world view as India was deemed the ‘cradle of civilization’. Nevertheless, as discussions on the Vedas began to be centered around race and ethnicity, Aryans became a part of European re-appropriation, which detached them from any Indian claim (Figueira, 2002, p. 48). By the late 19th century, the possibility of an Asian homeland was rejected, and several theories on the European origins of Aryans were floated. The British evaded the responsibility of implied equality with colonial Indian subjects by theorizing a European original homeland of the Aryans (Leopold, 1974).

The discovery of the Harappan civilization in the 1920s by the Archaeological Survey of India challenged the Aryan worldview as it was clearly advanced and pre-Aryan. The decline of the Indus Valley civilization (IVC) was then linked with the Aryan invasion. By shifting the chronology of IVC, Mortimer Wheeler, then Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), blamed the annihilation of the Indus cities on Indra and his Aryan hordes. This argument was later withdrawn by Wheeler himself, but Wheeler’s theory, rooted in ‘colonial framework of oriental despotism and racial conflicts’ (Kumar, 2020, p.6), had already made inroads in Indian historiography. It was also challenged by archaeologists as “evidence pointed rather to the opposite conclusion—that a considerable time elapsed between the end of the Indus culture and the Aryan occupation” (Basham, 1949, p. 141), and later researchers dismissed Wheeler’s theory to explore other natural causes to determine the decline of the IVC.

Hindu nationalism and the Aryans

The Hindu nationalist engagement with the AIT developed as a critique of philology and colonialism, allowing them to contest European appropriation of the Aryan legacy. These writings are also a challenge to the implied racial, linguistic, and caste divisions of the AIT. Ideological and political constraints guided the appropriation of AIT in Indian politics.

Koenraad Elst (1999) identifies Jyotirao Phule as the first person to make political use of the AIT in India. Phule (1853) employed the AIT to claim indigeneity for lower castes who had been subjugated by the Brahmin invaders. Phule sought to provide an ethnic and racial basis for the unity of the masses, although it excluded Brahminism (Begari, 2010). In contrast, Swami Vivekananda (2006) questioned the philological construction of AIT and alleged that it is replicating the slavery paradigm of the United States in India. He argues that there is no known

scriptural reference to the migration of the Aryans to India, rejecting the premise of AIT and its implications of the North-South and caste divide.

Sri Aurobindo (1914/1971) also rejected the AIT as a philological myth based on mistranslations of the Vedas and stood for 'a unity of physical and cultural type, throughout India' (p. 37). He observed that the metaphorical descriptions of virtues have been construed as racial references by translators. He criticised the equivalence of language and race in philology, questioning its scientific foundations:

Common origin of language or even common language does not prove common ethnic origin... Philology is, in fact not yet a science, but rather far too largely a structure of ingenuities and plausible conjectures. It set out with the hope of discovering the origin of language and the scientific laws of its development, but it has failed entirely. (Sri Aurobindo, 2003, p. 611)

Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1925) located the original home of the Indo-Aryans in the Arctic based on the evidence of longer days and nights in the Rigveda. He argues against philology and stresses the difficulty of translation of the Vedas due to their remote antiquity and loss of semantic transparency. Philological results, Tilak observes, should be backed by other sciences like geology, archaeology, paleology, and mythology. He uses astronomical dating to establish the antiquity of the Vedas to fulfil his aims of Hindu renaissance and revival. Tilak's position shows aggressive nationalism as he traced the Aryan home to the Arctic, expanding India's potential territory (Sharma, 1995).

Unlike other Hindu leaders, V.D. Savarkar, the founder of *Hindutva*, accepted the AIT and did not engage with the scholarly debate at all. He rather tried to accommodate his political views within the existing oriental research. To achieve his aims, Savarkar (1923/1969) culturally differentiated the Aryans who travelled to India from their Persian kins. He argues that the Aryans who entered India were developing a distinct nationality by adopting a shared identity which was tied to the local landscape, the 'Sapta-Sindhu'. The indigeneity of the Aryans was not important to the imperatives of *Hindutva* if a sense of belonging of the Aryans with the Indian *Holyland* could be constructed. For Savarkar, all the ancient races of India melded into one Hindu race with inter-caste marriages, and hence the previous racial categories, including the Aryans, are no longer discernible. The cultural and biological synthesis of all people of India, as formulated by Savarkar, thereby allows him to reject the divisiveness of the Indian nation embedded within

the AIT. Savarkar's position on incoming Aryans is similar to that of Nehru, who rejected a war-like invasion in favour of cultural synthesis of the Aryans and the Dravidians (Kaiwar, 2003), but with a fundamental difference in vision of nationhood, where Savarkar stands for an unchanging Indian nationhood and Nehru for a constructivist view of nation.

M.S. Golwalkar (1947), the second sarsanghchalak of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), contests the validity of the 'shady' Western histories that are shaped by the superiority of race. He positions Indian civilization as a 'progressive and highly civilized nation' of Aryan descent (p.42). Golwalkar is cognizant of the complexity of the Aryan debate, which could be employed to the advantage of the British to justify foreign rule. Rejecting the idea of invasion, he writes:

By showing that the Hindus are mere upstarts and squatters on the land (as they themselves are in America, Australia and other places!), they can set up their own claim. For then neither the Hindus nor the Europeans are indigenous and as to who should possess this land, becomes merely a matter of superior might, mere priority of trespass giving no better right to any race to rule undisturbed on any part of the globe. (Golwalkar, 1947, p.43)

Golwalkar, however, clusters all hypotheses on the Aryan theory as conjectural; only the hypothesis of the indigenous origin of Hindus is acceptable; he (1947) writes:

Man's knowledge of those times is merely conjectural. He puts forth hypotheses, which are merely of tentative value. Hypothesis is not truth. Out of the heap of hypotheses, we reject all and positively maintain that we Hindus came into this land from nowhere, but are indigenous children of the soil always, from times immemorial and are natural masters of the country. (p.46)

For Golwalkar (1966), AIT is an exercise in systematic indoctrination of the Hindus by using oriental historiography, shaped by the concerns of imperialism, to break the national spirit of the Indian people.

Saraswati and the discursive shift in the *Hindutva* historiography

K.D. Sethna (1980/1992) is a precursor to the subsequent writings on Saraswati and AIT, as he linked the fortified pre-Harappan archaeological findings at Kalibangan and Kot Dijito to the

Vedic civilization. Sethna strengthens his pre-Harappan Aryan hypothesis by linking these settlements to the Rigvedic Saraswati valley. However, the Saraswati was majorly incorporated in the Hindu nationalist discourse with the LANDSAT imaging of dry channels in the north-west in the 1980s, which were used to construct the path of the mythical Saraswati.

The Akhil Bharatiya Itihasa Sankalana Yojana (ABISY), founded around 1978-79 by RSS pracharak Moropant Pingley, categorically ties its research on the AIT with palaeontological research on Saraswati and argues for a later dating of the Rigveda and renaming of the Harappan civilisation as 'Indus-Saraswati Civilisation'. Archaeologist V.S.Wakankar was part of a multidisciplinary research campaign by ABISY on the Saraswati paleochannels in Haryana, aiming at the correction of the colonial version of history. Wakankar (1987) states that the pre-Harappan (now known as early Harappan) agricultural sites in the districts of present-day Punjab and Haryana are indigenous, as there is no sign of external immigration. He writes that the Vedic culture developed on the banks of the river Saraswati with Mesolithic hunter-gatherers who evolved into the agricultural communities of the Vedic period. Arguing for a greater antiquity of the Vedas, he interprets the story of 'Vratrasur' in the Rigveda and Puranas as symbolic writing of climatic changes in the upper Paleolithic Ice Age. He relates the end of the Harappan civilisation with the desiccation of the Saraswati due to tectonic shifts and a change of course. He observes that the AIT is an imperial agenda to divide the Indian people into Aryans, Dravidians, and Adivasis, when archaeological proof shows continuity of civilisation.

David Frawley (1991) considers the Saraswati river as one of greater significance, when compared to the Indus, based on the evidence of a number of hymns in the Rigveda, and identifies the Ghaggar river with the Rigvedic Saraswati based on 'Nadistutisukta', the 75th hymn of the Rigveda. Along with the evidence of the fire altars, the Indus Valley civilization is deemed post-Vedic, as Frawley argues that the end of both, with the desiccation of Saraswati, ties them together. Based on the description of the Saraswati in the Rigveda and archaeological findings along the Ghaggar-Hakra channels, N.S Rajaram(1993-1994) proposes that the Saraswati river mentioned in the Rigveda is a part of IVC and hence, IVC is Vedic-Aryan and the Rigveda is pre-Harappan. NS Rajaram (1993-1994) uses the Ghaggar-Hakra dating to point out the disruption it causes in the existing chronology of the Aryans:

Rig Veda may or may not say, it most emphatically describes North India as it was before the Saraswati dried up...This immediately leads us to a couple of anomalous situations to say the least. First, if the Aryans came into India only about 1500 BC and composed the

Rig Veda around 1200 BC, how did they describe a river and geography as it was before 1900 BC? Even more puzzling, why did they cross six great rivers—the Indus and its five tributaries— only to set up a great civilization, and worship it as the holiest of rivers? The verdict of archaeology, therefore, is clear and unambiguous: the Rig Veda describes North India as it was before the decline of the Harappan culture. Therefore, the Harappan society was Vedic Aryan. And the Aryan Dravidian divide is modern day fiction....High Harappan culture—c. 3000 to 1900 BC—is post-Rig Vedic, in a manner to be made specific. (p. 4-5)

Rajaram and Frawley (1997) call for a scientifically validated timeline of ancient Indian history based on the Saraswati framework, as they link the end of the Vedic period with the terminating point of Saraswati.

These conclusions were then rejected by scholars, as it was argued that satellite photography cannot prove the chronology or historical details of the desiccation of the river Saraswati as proposed by Frawley and Rajaram (Mukherjee, 1997-1998, Witzel, 2001). Geological studies, however, continue to guide speculative reinterpretations of Sanskrit texts to arrive at estimates of the drying of the Saraswati, combined with the importance of the Saraswati in Rigvedic hymns establish Saraswati as the focal point of Indus-Valley civilization (Feuerstein, Kak, & Frawley, 1995). The chronology of the Rigvedic books is also disputed to conclude that the Rigvedic hymns precede the desiccation of Saraswati and abandonment of the Harappan sites.

Koenraad Elst (1999) anticipates the impact of the evidence of Saraswati as it seeks to challenge the complete chronology of the Vedic texts, including the Sutras. Pushing the chronology of the Vedic Aryans, he speculates that the Kassite and Mittani people, identified as Indo-Aryans, could have migrated from the Sapta-Sindhu due to the desiccation of the Saraswati river around 2000 B.C., which would explain their ‘sudden appearance’. In Hindu nationalist writings, the re-discovery of Saraswati signifies the end of the ‘linguistic tyranny’ of AIT:

Who will believe that the Aryans crossed up to six great rivers - the Indus and the Sutlej with its tributaries —only to settle down on the banks of a river that had gone dry five hundred years earlier, and went on to worship it as “best of mothers, best of rivers, best of goddesses”. (Rig-Veda, II.41.16)? It is clear that the Vedic people who sang hymns in

praise of the Saraswati lived along its banks while it was in full flow. (Danino & Nahar, 1996, p.75-76)

In the works of Talageri (1993, 2000), Saraswati presents as a boundary used to mark the north-western expansion of the Vedic Aryans based on the Rigvedic evidence and chronology. On the basis of his proposed Rigvedic chronology, he argues that the Indus was not known to the early Aryans during the composition of the earliest hymns. He writes that it is only after the expansion of the Vedic people towards the Indus valley that it became an important part of the Rigvedic hymns. In his analysis, the IVC becomes a joint civilisation of two groups of Aryans, the Anus and the Purus. For an early dating of the Rigveda, Talageri cites GurdipSingh's 1971 report on aridity in the north-western region around 1800 BC (corrected to ~2100 BC) to conclude the drying of the Saraswati in the same period. Talageri's hypothesis of expanding geography of the Vedic Aryans towards the northwest from the banks of the Saraswati is also used to support the migration of Indo-Aryans from India.

Archaeologist B.B. Lal (2009) drew upon the Rigveda to construct the image of the Saraswati as a river that flowed from the mountains to the sea between the Yamuna and the Sutlej, which conflicts with its identification with rivers in Afghanistan and validates the identification of the Saraswati with the Ghaggar-Hakra. He corroborates his research with geological research on tectonic movements causing diversion of waters of the Saraswati. Lal also co-relates the dating of the abandonment of Kalibangan with the drying of the Saraswati, i.e., 1900 B.C. He maps the area of the Vedic civilization based on the flora and fauna, which matches the spread of the IVC, arguing for a Vedic-Harappan continuity. The chronology of Saraswati demands a high chronology for the Rigveda, which, according to Lal, cannot be later than 2000 B.C., making it contemporaneous to the Harappan civilisation. He, however, refrains from a final conclusion as the Indus script remains undeciphered. He also proposes cultural continuity between the archaeological artifacts of the Indus-Saraswati civilization and present Hindu society, an approach criticised as unhistorical.

In 2010, Danino tried to reconcile the opposing scientific studies on hydrology and climatic conditions in the north-western region with the archaeological evidence to arrive at the conclusion that the Harappans enjoyed a wetter climate, which moved towards aridity and drought around 2200 B.C. He traces the phases of the Saraswati River based on recent scientific studies but stresses the importance of future multidisciplinary research. Denino also challenges

the 2019 genetic research by Reich et al. in favour of AMT due to restricted population samples and circular arguments.

G.D. Bakshi (2019) called for a new paradigm shift in the study of the Indian past based on 'new evidence' of the 'historicity of the river Saraswati'. Although Bakshi places his text against racist colonial knowledge, he himself racializes the origin of the Indian civilization by equating Brahmins with Aryans (Kumar, 2022). Bakshi creates a datable timeline of desiccation of the Saraswati by selectively citing data supporting his co-relation of Saraswati with the Harappan, while ignoring the directly contradicting research. He repeatedly states that the Aryans could not have moved into a dry NW area, which was already showing migration by the natives. However, the northwestern people could have moved east and west in search of fertile land, an argument that cannot be called evidentiary. Bakshi also selectively engages with genetic data; for instance, he claims that no migrations have taken place in the last 12000 years, as Mt DNA does not show any variation. But Mt DNA does not reveal paternal DNA, which is important as genetic influx from Central Asia was male-driven due to the patriarchal structure of early Aryans (Silva et al., 2017).

Historiographical Analysis

The nationalist identification of the modern Ghaggar-Hakra is rooted in colonial research in historiography and cartography, which provide neutrality and legitimacy to their readings. Even the chronology of the composition of the Rigveda is suggested by M. Viven de Saint-Martin, who interpreted that the composition of 'Nadi-Sukta' must have happened after the arrival of the Aryans to the Saraswati valley (Chadha, 2011). The Harappan-Saraswati linkage, as proposed by anti-AIT research, is disputed as historians contest the identification of these sites as Harappan. It is argued that many of the sites prove Harappan contact only, with a distinctive local culture (Ratnagar, 2001; Thapar, 2002). There is 'hardly any correspondence' between the Vedic literature and the excavated Harappan sites, writes Ratnagar (2001, p. 7). The Hindu nationalist writings focus more on criticism of the AIT but do not largely engage with the arguments in AMT research, while rejecting both.

The approach of current research, which has sought to identify a discovered river bed with Saraswati without first critically examining the known location of Saraswati from the Rigveda, is also criticized (Aklujkar, 2014). There have been speculations of the identification of Rigvedic Saraswati with the Helmand of Afghanistan by scholars, contesting the identification of

Ghaggar-Hakra with Saraswati. Despite many objections, the paleochannels in the north-western region have been widely examined to map the Saraswati and the dating of Harappa. It is difficult to reach a consensus, as scientific studies also differ in their findings. Clift et al. (2012) showed that the Yamuna and Sutlej deviated 20,000 years ago and 10,000 years ago, respectively, which makes it unlikely that the river channel contributed to the migration of the Harappans. Valdiya (2017) contends that the Saraswati was a perennial river until tectonic activities caused the deviation of the Tons River to join the Yamuna in 1750 BC. Chatterjee, Ray et al. (2019) show that the Ghaggar was perennial during 78,000-18,000 BC and 7,000-2,500 BC as it was receiving sediments from the Himalayas. Major river channels of the Saraswati had disappeared by 6000 B.C., while the Ghaggar survived as a monsoon-fed river network (Sinha, 2020).

Concluding remarks

The association of the post-colonial response with Hindu nationalist concerns has resulted in an ‘increasingly political, emotional, polemical, and strident’ debate, while exchange between scholars of South Asia has become impossible as researchers are stereotyped as “Hindu nationalist,” “western neo-colonialist,” or “Marxist secularist” (Bryant, 2005, p. 470). The anti-AIT writers have mostly remained marginalised, as it is argued that they do not engage with Western scholarship in terms of professional debate. Despite controversy, the Saraswati discourse has future implications for the Aryan theory and Indian history. Motives and ideologies notwithstanding, one must focus on the evidence and its interpretation to arrive at a consensus (Hock, 2005). The scientific research on Saraswati discourse offers scope to develop a scholarly consensus via transparency and verifiable evidence in the future. Substantiated by archaeological confirmation, especially in the cases of Bhawalpur and Kalibangan, as evidenced by archaeological studies in India and Pakistan, the geological and hydrological research in the north-west is likely to become increasingly significant in the coming years with respect to the Harappan civilization and, consequently, the question of the Aryans in India.

References

- Adluri, V. P. (2011). Pride and Prejudice: Orientalism and German Indology. *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, 15(3), 253–292. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41476649>
- Aklujkar, A. (2014). Saraswati drowned: Rescuing her from scholarly whirlpools. In Nalini Rao (ed.), *Sindhu-Saraswati civilization: New perspectives* (pp. 89–187). D. K. Print World Ltd.

- Bakshi, G.D. (2019). *The Saraswati civilisation: a paradigm shift in ancient Indian history*. Garuda Prakashan.
- Basham, A. L. (1949). Recent Work on the Indus Civilization. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 13(1), 140–145. DOI: 10.1017/S0041977X00081891
- Begari, J. (2010). JYOTIRAO PHULE: A Revolutionary Social Reformer. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 71(2), 399–412. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42753704>
- Bryant, E.F. (2005). Concluding remarks. In Bryant, E. F. & Patton, L.L. (Eds.). *The Indo-Aryan controversy: Evidence and inference in Indian history* (pp. 468-506). Routledge.
- Chadha, A. (2011). Conjuring a river, imagining civilisation: Saraswati, archaeology and science in India. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 45(1), 55–83. <https://doi.org/10.1177/006996671004500103>
- Chakrabarti, Dilip K. (2000). Colonial Indology and identity. *Antiquity*, 74, 667-671. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X0006004X>
- Chatterjee, A., Ray, J.S., Shukla, A.D., Pande, K. (2019). On the existence of a perennial river in the Harappan heartland. *Scientific Report*, 9, Article 17221. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-019-53489-4>
- Clift, P. D., Carter, A., Giosan, L., Durcan, J., Duller, G. A. T., Macklin, M. G., Alizai, A., Tabrez, A. R., Danish, M., VanLaningham, S., & Fuller, D. Q. (2012). U-Pb zircon dating evidence for a Pleistocene Sarasvati River and capture of the Yamuna River. *Geology*, 40(3), 211–214. <https://doi.org/10.1130/G32840.1>
- Danino, M. & Nahar, S. (1996). *The invasion that never was*. Mother's Institute of Research.
- Danino, M. (2010). *The lost river: on the trail of the Sarasvati*. Penguin.
- Elst, K. (1999). *Update on the Aryan Debate*. Aditya Prakashan.
- Feuerstein, G., Kak, S., & Frawley, D. (1999). *In search of the cradle of civilization: New light on ancient India*. Motilal Banarsidass Publishing House.

- Figueira, Dorothy M. (2002). *Aryans, Jews, Brahmins: Theorizing Authority through Myths of Identity*. State University of New York Press.
- Frawley, D. (1991). *Gods, Sages and Kings: Vedic Secrets of Ancient Civilization*. Passage Press.
- Gupta, C. (1999). Sectional President's Address: Social Processes: Modes and patterns of social change in early India. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 60, 19–50.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/44144071>
- Golwalkar, M. S. (1947). *We, or our nationhood defined* (4th ed.). Bharat Prakashan.
- Golwalkar, M. S. (1966). *Bunch of thoughts*. Vikrama Prakashan.
- Hutton, C. (2025). *The people that never were: Linguistic scholarship and the invention of the Aryans*. Oxford University Press.
- Hock, H. H. (2005). Philology and the historical interpretation of the Vedic texts. In Bryant, E. F. & Patton, L.L. (Eds.). *The Indo-Aryan controversy: Evidence and inference in Indian history* (pp. 282-308). Routledge.
- Kaiwar, V. (2003). The Aryan Model of History and the Oriental Renaissance: The Politics of Identity in an Age of Revolutions, Colonialism, and Nationalism. In V. Kaiwar & S. Mazumdar (Eds.), *Antinomies of Modernity: Essays on Race, Orient, Nation* (pp. 13–61). Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11smwcs.5>
- Kumar, A. (2020). Nationalising the Harappan Past: India, Pakistan and Mortimer Wheeler in the Early Post-Colonial South Asia. *Atna-Journal of Tourism Studies*.
<https://doi.org/10.12727/AJTS.24.1>
- Kumar, A. (2022). [Review of the book *The Saraswati civilisation: a paradigm shift in ancient Indian history*, by G.D. Bakshi]. Why the Aryans still matter? History, historiography and politics. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*. 17(3), 1-10.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2455328X211063048>
- Lal, B.B. (2009). *How deep are the roots of Indian civilization Archaeology answers*. Aryan Books International.

- Leopold, J. (1974). British Applications of the Aryan Theory of Race to India, 1850-1870. *The English Historical Review*, 89(352), 578–603. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/567427>
- Mukherjee, B. N. (1997–1998). The unsolved Aryan problem. *Indologica Taurinensia*, XXIII XXIV.
- Phule, J. G. (1991). *Slavery (In the civilised British government under the cloak of Brahmanism)* (P. G. Patil, Trans.). Education Department, Government of Maharashtra. (Original work published 1873)
- Rajaram, N. S. (1993–1994). Vedic and Harappan culture: New findings. *Puratattva: Bulletin of the Indian Archaeological Society*, 24, 1–8.
- Rajaram, N. S., & Frawley, D. (1997). *Vedic Aryans and the origins of civilization: A literary and scientific perspective*. Voice of India.
- Ratnagar, S. (2001). *Understanding Harappa: Civilization in the greater Indus valley*. Tulika.
- Roy, B. (2016). Friedrich Max Müller and the Emergence of Identity Politics in India and Germany. *Publications of the English Goethe Society*, 85(2–3), 217–228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09593683.2016.1224512>
- Savarkar, V.D. (1969). *Hindutva* (5th ed.). Veer Savarkar Prakashan. (Original work published 1923)
- Sethna, K. D. (Amal Kiran). (1992). The problem of Aryan origins: From an Indian point of view. Sri Aurobindo Ashram. (Original work published 1980) <https://motherandsriaurobindo.in/disciples/amal-kiran/books/the-problem-of-aryan-origins/>
- Sinha, R., Singh, A., & Khan, I. (2020). On non-contemporaneity of the Saraswati River and the Harappan Civilization in NW India: Constraints from subsurface chrono-stratigraphy and sedimentology. In S. K. Acharyya, K. Ghosh, & A. Kar (Eds.), *Saraswati: The river par excellence* (pp. 117–134). The Asiatic Society.
- Sharma, A. (1995). The Aryan question: Some general considerations. In G. Erdosy (Ed.), *The Indo-Aryans of Ancient South Asia: Language, material culture and ethnicity*. Walter de Gruyter.

Silva, M., Oliveira, M., Vieira, D., Brandão, A., Rito, T., Pereira, J. B., Fraser, R. M., Hudson, B., Gandini, F., Edwards, C., Pala, M., Koch, J., Wilson, J. F., Pereira, L., Richards, M. B., & Soares, P. (2017). A genetic chronology for the Indian Subcontinent points to heavily sex-biased dispersals. *BMC Evolutionary Biology*, 17(1), 88.

<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12862-017-0936-9>

Sri Aurobindo. (1971). *The secret of the Veda*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

— — —. (2003). *Early cultural writings* (Vol. 1). Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department.

Talageri, S.G. (1993). *Aryan invasion theory and Indian nationalism*. Voice of India.

— — —. (2000). *Rigveda: A historical analysis*. Aditya Prakashan.

Thapar, R. (1978). *Ancient Indian social history: Some interpretations*. Orient Longman.

— — —. (2002). *Early India: From the origins to AD 1300*. University of California Press.

Tilak, B.G. (1925). *The Arctic home in the Vedas*. Tilak Bros.

Valdiya, K. S. (2017). *Prehistoric river Saraswati, Western India: Geological appraisal and social aspects*. Springer.

Vivekananda, S. (2006). *The complete works of Swami Vivekananda* (Vol. 3). Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission.

Wakankar, V. S. (1987). Where is the Saraswati River? Fourteen historic findings of Archaeological Survey. *Manthan*, 8(3), 29–33.

Wheeler, R. E. M. (1968). *The Indus Civilization*. (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Witzel, M. (2001). Autochthonous Aryans? The evidence from old Indian and Iranian texts.

Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies, 7(3), 1–93. <https://hasp.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/ejvs/article/view/830/808>

Zia-Ebrahimi, R. (2011). Self-Orientalization and dislocation: the uses and abuses of the Aryan discourse in Iran. *Iranian Studies*, 44(4), 445–472. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23033306>



Ahimsa and Beyond: Animal Ethics in Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu Thought

Prabhu Preetam Roul

B. Ed Student

Regional Institute of Education

NCERT, Bhubaneswar

Odisha, India.

Dr. Dipanshu Sharma

Assistant Professor of Education

Regional Institute of Education

NCERT, Bhubaneswar

Odisha, India.

Ishita Mishra

M.Ed. Scholar

Regional Institute of Education

NCERT, Bhubaneswar

Odisha, India

Abstract

The paper examines the philosophical underpinnings and animal ethics in the three leading Indian religions, namely, Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. The core of this question is ahimsa (nonviolence), which can be seen as a connecting moral principle across these traditions, despite varying perceived and practiced variations. Jainism has made ahimsa the highest ideal of ethical conduct, requiring the strict avoidance of harm to all living organisms, even the smallest ones. Buddhism situates animal ethics within its broader ethics of compassion (karuṇā) and interdependence, and emphasizes the relational character of moral responsibility. Hindu ethics, both varied and stratified, incorporates animal ethics through dharma, karma, and respect for sacred animals, with a balance among ritual, symbolic, and ecological aspects. Comparing these traditions, the paper identifies the similarities and differences in their attitude to animal ethics. It shows that, according to Indian philosophies, there is a vision of ethical responsibility that goes beyond anthropocentric models, placing animals as entities within the moral world. Moreover, these views are echoed in modern discussions of environmental justice, environmental sustainability, and animal rights, which provide a counter-story to industrial exploitation and ecological disaster. The paper concludes that a reinterpretation and reexamination of Indian traditions of ahimsa and compassion can help shape global discourses on animal ethics to create a more humane, earth-conscious, and ethically inclusive future.



Received: 25.03..2026

Accepted: 13.06.2026

Published: 15.06.2026

CJHSSC, Volume: 2

Issue: 1, June 2026

Page: 124 - 142

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20707269>

Corresponding author: kukumuku97@gmail.com

Copyright: Author © 2026



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Published by: Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College,
Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

Available at: www.ssjalangirlscollege.org.in/journal.php
Email: confluence.ssjgc@gmail.com

Keywords: Ahimsa, Animal Ethics, Jainism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Ecological Wisdom.

Introduction

Ahimsa, meaning non-injury or, more simply, nonviolence, is an ethical principle in ancient Indian philosophy. Being a combination of the Sanskrit 'hims' (to strike or cause harm) and 'a', which means negation, ahimsa means literally the lack of harm or injury of any living being by an action, word, or even thought (Britannica, n.d.). Historically, it can be found in the Vedic period (c. 1500-500 BCE), in which it already appears in the Taittiriya Samhita of the Yajurveda (non-injury to the sacrifice-er), and in the Shatapatha Brahmana (in the sense of non-injury more generally). The first ethical use of animals (pashu-ahimsa) is found in the Kapisthala Katha Samhita of the Yajurveda c. 8th century BCE (Damodran, 1969). Though animal sacrifice was common in Vedic rituals, a move towards nonviolence emerged in later Vedic literature.

This development is brought out clearly in the Upanisads, which are philosophical texts accompanying the Vedas (c. 800-300 BCE). One of the oldest Upanishads, Chāndogya Upanisad, enumerates ahimsa as one of five key virtues, along with truthfulness (satya), straightforwardness (ārjava), charity (dāna), and austerity (tapas), and identifies it with ethical behaviour that helps to escape the phenomena of rebirth (Chāndogya Upanishad 3.17.4; Britannica, n.d.). The Chāndogya Upanisad (8.15.1) also stresses the idea of non-harm to all creatures (sarva-bhuta), with several exceptions in the ritual situation, as a shift towards sacrificial practice towards wider moral restraint (Hossain, 2025). These trends indicate an increased emphasis on compassion, renunciation, and the acknowledgment of interactive forms of life during the period of social and religious experimentation in ancient India.

Within animal ethics, these traditions see animals not only as resources but also as living beings who can suffer, karmic beings who can be reborn, or sacred, symbolic beings that represent the presence of deities. The Jain doctrine states that all beings possess souls (jīva) that have equal potential for liberation and that absolute non-harm is required of them. Buddhism demonstrates compassion (karunā) and loving-kindness (mettā) to sentient beings in the rebirth realms. In contrast, Hinduism tends to respect animals as embodiments of deities (e.g., the cow as sacred) or forces of cosmic order (ṛta) and dharma (Kemmerer, 2012; Krishna, 2010). Animals, therefore, make a connection between human and divine realms through karma, reincarnation, and interdependence.

The main research questions that are discussed in this paper are: How do Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions treat ahimsa differently: Jain absolutism to Buddhist pragmatism and Hindu

contextual application? What are the ethical aspects that go beyond nonviolence, like animal rights (freedom against exploitation), welfare (kindness in treatment), and spiritual liberation (one path to moksha or nirvana)?

The importance of these views is felt worldwide today. Ahimsa educates the modern animal rights movements, veganism, and ecological ethics to confront the industrial exploitation during biodiversity crises. The meaning of ahimsa, as interpreted by Mahatma Gandhi as compassion to the helpless (including animals), had a tremendous impact on the contemporary Indian animal protection, anti-vivisection, and animal welfare policy, as it regards the moral development of a nation through the way it treats animals (Jena, 2017; Akbarsha, 2010). When Gandhi applied nonviolence to animals, he bridged the gap between ancient ideals and political activism, thereby motivating interfaith and international activism.

Therefore, even though ahimsa is the common principle of non-harm in Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions, animal ethics in these traditions go beyond it in terms of karma and rebirth, compassion, cosmic interdependence, dharma, and equality of souls to generate unique but complementary approaches of practical value in the study of animal welfare and environmental philosophy today.

Literature Review

Lisa Kemmerer's *Animals and World Religions* (2012) is a classic work on animal ethics, as it breaks down each major religion and provides specific chapters on Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Kemmerer discusses the Bible, myths, models, and modern activists inspired by religious convictions regarding animal protection, highlighting how these traditions can foster kindness and nonviolence and criticize oppression (Kemmerer, 2012). *Sacred Animals of India* by Nanditha Krishna (2010) is dedicated to Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, and it follows traditions that led to the adoration of animals in terms of karma, rebirth, and godly appearances. Krishna outlines sacred animals (e.g., cows, elephants) and practices such as protection against harm, and claims that this sanctity comes to life through interdependent life cycles (Krishna, 2010).

Peter Adamson's article, *Indian Animal Ethics* (2023), provides a brief philosophical introduction, making it clear that ahimsa is a fundamental principle requiring people not to be cruel to animals. Adamson postulates that ancient Indian logic, based on soul equality, karma, and rebirth, provides a better explanation for vegetarianism than utilitarianism, common in Western animal rights discussions (Adamson, 2023).

The present debates are centered on the rigid and moribund notions of ahimsa and whether vegetarianism is an ethical compulsion or a cultural activity. Jainism subjects nonviolence, including microorganisms, to an absolute imperative and the moral obligation of strict vegetarianism/veganism (Kemmerer, 2012). Buddhism is pragmatic about the middle way, and the Theravada exception regarding meat, grounded in the threefold purity rule, contrasts with the Mahayana's more vegetarian focus (Adamson, 2023). Hinduism is contextually flexible: after the Vedic transformation, animal sacrifice was accepted as part of Vedic practices; in some sects (including Vaisnavism), post-Vedic changes advocated ahimsa and vegetarianism, but dharma allowed exceptions on a case-by-case basis (or for geographical or other needs) (Krishna, 2010). Vegetarianism is culturally diverse, as it is often ethical in the sūtras and epics, though not universal; some scholars interpret vegetarianism as a marker of purity or even a social norm, although it is discussed as an issue of inconsistency in the modern context (such as in Pew Research Centre data of varying adherence) (Pew Research Centre, 2021).

These contributions notwithstanding, there remain gaps in comparative studies that focus on dimensions beyond ahimsa. Much of the literature dwells upon nonviolence itself, rather than its extensions, such as karma-rebirth abidance (open moral position across the species), Buddhist mindfulness and interdependence (pratītyasamutpāda), Jain soul egalitarianism, or Hindu ecological dharma and cosmic order (ṛta). The most recent literature is beginning to treat them (e.g., Adamson, 2023). However, little has been done to conduct thorough analyses that incorporate compassion, liberation potential, and environmental holism, especially in relating ancient literature to modern practice (e.g., animal rights, veganism, biodiversity ethics).

The paper attempts to fill these gaps by pre-empting beyond-ahimsa structures using textual and comparative approaches grounded in the current body of research to emphasize ancillary ethical resources.

Theoretical Framework: Indic Relational Ethics of Flourishing

Building on an analysis of ahimsā, this study develops an original framework for Indic Relational Ethics of Flourishing, hereafter referred to as 'Beyond Ahimsā'. Current research on nonviolence (Kemmerer, 2012; Valpey, 2020) within the three traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism offers a detailed descriptive analysis, the majority of these investigations limit their exploration of nonviolence to an examination of its avoidance of harm. This study goes on to explore the positive, relational, and ecological obligations towards animals and as participants in moral,

spiritual, and ecological webs of relations, in which they are not mere objects and are not to be harmed.

“Beyond Ahimsā,” therefore, involves three key levels or dimensions of positive, ecological, animal-oriented obligations. Firstly, there is the dimension of karmic reciprocity and species egalitarianism (Jainism), which, as mentioned earlier, relates to the ‘equal’ status of all jīvas (souls), as outlined in Tattvārtha Sūtra 5.21 (parasparopagraho jīvānām or ‘souls render service to one another’), as well as in terms of an ethic of mutual support and in terms of the practice of aparigraha (minimalism/ecological sensitivity) in order to not cause harm to any other living being. The second relevant dimension, therefore, would relate to Buddhist teachings of compassionate interdependence, as laid out through the aforementioned principle of pratīyasamutpāda (dependent origination), which also leads to the practice of Bodhisattvahood/Bodhicitta, with the goal of which is to actively work towards the complete and definitive ‘liberation’ of all sentient beings from their sufferings of duḥkha. To achieve this goal, a Bodhisattva cultivates karuṇā (compassion) and mettā (loving-kindness) towards all sentient beings, helping them on their own spiritual paths to freedom. In this context, the practice of ānāpāṇisati (mindful observation of the in- and out-breath) is well known for cultivating mettā (loving-kindness). Finally, the obligations of ‘Beyond Ahimsā’ involve a third level or dimension, which refers to Hindu teachings of cosmic stewardship. As outlined earlier, in this regard, humans have the divine assignment of protecting, honoring, respecting, and also serving their various species as a form of reverent and pious service to the Divine. All of this relates to the protection of ṛta (cosmic order) as well as to our relations to, and treatment of, nature in general as well as to prakṛti in her form as divine or in her form as the material, physical world that is to be conserved, for example, in the form of practices such as go-rakṣā (cow protection) which, in terms of dharma, enable a human being to fulfill his or her spiritual duties in life as a guardian/steward of the natural world.

The Indic Relational Ethics of Flourishing thus recognizes that animals are karmically continuous with humans. Their flourishing or lack thereof is intrinsically tied to that of humans, positively or negatively impacting their spiritual growth and the health of the planet. In contrast to dominant Western animal ethics models of rights to life based on individualism (Regan) or sentience for the greater good (Singer) that view animals as largely separate from humans, this triadic model of nonviolence recognizes and can be motivated by the interdependent systemic relationships between all living beings, is guided by karmic reasons to treat animals well, and is

characterized by a focus on primarily positive obligations of care for all living beings within an ecological framework.

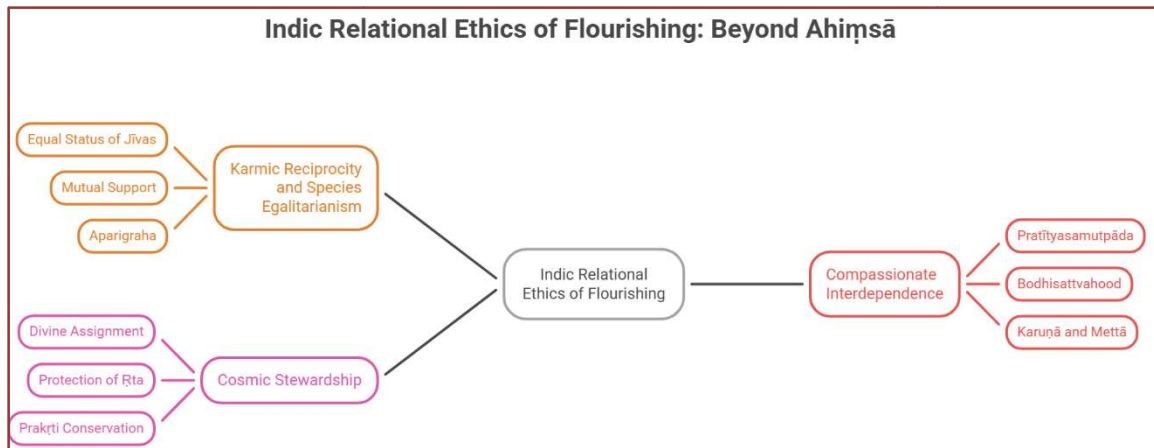


Figure 1 Indic Relational Ethics of Flourishing: Beyond Ahimsa

This framework emerges from a hermeneutic study of primary texts. It seeks to synthesize the strengths of individual traditions in order to arrive at a coherent framework for the study of ethics.

Methodology

This study conducts a qualitative comparative textual analysis of animal ethics across the Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions, focusing on the dimensions of ahimsa and its extensions. It uses historical and philosophical interpretations in a hermeneutic approach to re-read the classic texts of these religions, thereby arriving at new perspectives on animal welfare and environmental ethics.

We primarily draw on a selection of canonical texts—ancient and classical—that treat animals most explicitly. For Jainism, these are, primarily, the *Ācārāṅga Sūtra* (trans. Jacobi, 1884/2008). In Buddhism, we employ the *Dhammapada*, the *Jātaka* tales, and the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*. For Hinduism, our study of classical animal ethics relies most heavily on the *Upaniṣads* (especially the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*), *Bhagavad Gītā*, the laws of Manu (*Manu Smṛti*), and the various *Purāṇas*. The texts we selected were purposively sampled, with the criteria outlined above as our primary focus. Secondary sources have also been chosen to provide us with some interpretive framework and to allow us to engage in a fully comparative manner, for example, Kemmerer (2012), Krishna (2010), Valpey (2020), and Finnigan (2017).

The study applies a hermeneutic circle of reading as a method for analyzing the studied texts. The initial reading involves a literal translation of the selected passages followed by historical and cultural contextualization. This is, in turn, followed by a higher level of philosophical reading to understand the core concepts of the studied traditions, such as the equality of all jīvas, the reality of pratīyasamutpāda, and the concept of ṛta (cosmic order). The key concepts of these traditions are analyzed in light of the studied passages and compared with modern non-anthropocentric approaches to animal ethics. The approach of comparison and contrast between the traditions enables the researcher to highlight both differences (e.g., Jain absolutism versus Buddhist pragmatism and Hindu dharma) and similarities (e.g., karmic interdependence and compassion). The main themes are identified through close reading of the selected texts and by analyzing and synthesizing the different approaches of the three studied traditions in order to develop an original framework, referred to as the “Indic Relational Ethics of Flourishing”.

The study is restricted to textual analysis. Although hermeneutics recognizes that there are differences within every tradition as to how to interpret it at any given time in its history, there is no ethnography of practice here. To establish a new theory useful in the field of animal ethics, this study can serve as a foundation for further empirical research and its applications.

Jainism: Ahimsa as Absolute and the Equality of Souls

Ahimsa (nonviolence) is not an ethical code but the highest ethical rule (ahimsa paramo dharma), which is the foundation of spiritual practice and perspective in Jainism. This total respect for non-harm has deep philosophical roots, which underpin the principle of equality for all forms of life.

Key to the Jain metaphysics is the notion of jīva (soul or sentient essence), present in all living beings, human, animal, plant, and microscopic organisms. Every jīva has the ability to possess consciousness, perception, and the innate power of infinite knowledge, bliss, and liberation (moksha). This soul equality cuts across species lines, so that the differences between humans and nonhumans are not ethically relevant (Tattvārtha Sūtra, 2.1-2.15; Vallely, 2018). This is supplemented by anekantavada (the doctrine of many-sidedness or non-absolutism), which promotes more poly-faceted views and humility in judgment, which helps to tolerate and minimize dogmatic harm. Asceticism has five major vows (mahavratas), which include ahimsa (nonviolence), satya (truthfulness), asteya (non-stealing), brahmacharya (celibacy/chastity), and

aparigraha (non-possession), organising daily life with ahimsa being the primary vow permeating all the others (Tattvārtha Sūtra, 7.1-7.6).

Jain ethical conduct is very much characterized by extreme vigilance against harm. Devout laypeople and monks do not harm even those possessing one sense (ekendriya), including microorganisms, by sweeping out paths with a soft broom (rajoharana) and by adding a mouth covering (mukhavastra) to avoid unintentionally inhaling or exhaling them. Strict vegetarianism, which often goes as far as veganism, is obligatory since eating animal products or causing harm to plants leads to negative karma. Ascetics avoid root vegetables because they have a greater potential to disrupt life. This is due to the acknowledgement that all creatures are afraid of death and desire life, as it was discussed in ancient literature: the idea is that all breathing, existing, living, sentient creatures are not to be killed, not to be treated violently, abused, and tortured (Acaranga Sūtra, 1.1.6; Jacobi, 1884/translated edition).

These teachings are based on the primary sources such as the Acaranga Sūtra (one of the oldest canonical texts) which describes the behaviour of monks and strictly bans any harm that should be done to animals and microscopic life; the Tattvārtha Sūtra (the systematic exposition of Jain doctrine by Umāsvāti), which categorises souls by their sensory abilities and clearly states that such souls are equal despite these differences; and the Ratnakaranda Sravakacara (the guide for lay ethics by Samantabhadra), which outlines vows and practices emphasizing compassion toward all beings (Tattvārtha Sūtra; Ācārāṅga Sūtra).

In addition to ahimsa, animal ethics in Jainism is grounded in the principle of soul equality, which holds that injuring any jīva attaches karmic particles to the soul, hindering liberation. The animals, like human beings, are karmic beings who can be reborn and eventually achieve moksha; therefore, their protection is part of spiritual evolution. Ascetic self-control, renunciation of possessions, desires, and exploitation, is a way of getting moksha and cleansing the soul of karmic bondage. The aparigraha (non-possession) vow has far-reaching ecological consequences: minimalism and interdependence through consumption reduction, habitat destruction, and indirect destruction of animals (parasparopagraho jīvānām-"souls render service to one another") (Tattvārtha Sūtra, 5.21; Chapple, 2002).

Modern Jain animal ethics and animal sustainability are still alive. Jains have traditional panjrapoles (animal shelters) throughout India, where animals are cared for without exploitation, whether they are injured or abandoned. Contemporary efforts, including the Luvin Arms Animal

Sanctuary, Colorado (based on Jain doctrine), offer life to farmed animals, following ahimsa in non-religious settings. Jain philosophers and social movements promote veganism and environmentalism through a practice known as aparigraha, and sustainability, and these worldviews have shaped how the world discusses animal rights and environmentalism (Lombardi, 2025; Arihanta Institute, 2025). These attempts show the continued relevance of Jainism, with its strict guidelines for coexisting in a spirit of compassion amid ecological catastrophe.

Buddhism: Compassion, Rebirth, and Pragmatic Non-Harm

Ahimsa (nonviolence) is a Buddhist principle consistent with the broader ethical principle of reducing the suffering (duhkha) of all sentient beings. However, it is practiced pragmatically as part of the core teachings rather than as an absolute principle. The Four Noble Truths identify suffering as a part of existence, craving as the cause of suffering, state that suffering can end, and recommend the Eightfold Path, right view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration, as the path to liberation. This way takes the ethical conduct (sila) further to non-harm, where the loving-kindness (mettā) and compassion (karunā) are developed in practices such as the mettā sutta, where the goodwill is radiated to every being, with no exception; human beings, animals, and even gods (Dhammapada, verses 129-130; Finnigan, 2017).

Buddhist animal philosophy focuses on the sentience and common susceptibility to dukkha. No natural ontological hierarchical state of being that lacks moral consideration exists; animals are sentient (sattva) to the extent that they can experience pain, fear, and desire. The concept of reincarnation (samsara) is that species of species recycle themselves according to karma, including the animal realm (*tiracchanayoni*), i.e., any animal might have been a former relative, mother, or friend. This makes it sympathetic: "All tremble at violence; all fear death. Putting oneself in the place of another, one should not kill nor cause another to kill" (Dhammapada, 129). Animals endure excruciating torture, which includes predation, exploitation, and lack of knowledge, and therefore, their world is even more of dukkha than the human world (Valpey, 2004).

Ways and differences are contextual flexibility. In Theravada Buddhism (the most common in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar), monks have a version of the "threefold purity" rule: meat is permissible if it is not seen, heard, or suspected to have been killed specifically for the eater

(Jivaka Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya 55). This endorses alms-round pragmatism, but does not oblige vegetarianism. Mahayana traditions (China, Korea, Vietnam, Tibet), by contrast, are much stricter in vegetarianism, and meat-eating is considered to be inconsistent with compassion and bodhisattva vows. It is sometimes prohibited by monastic codes (Finnigan, 2017; Nigam & Chandra, 2026).

These views are depicted using primary texts. The Dhammapada emphasizes universal non-harm and sympathy for fearful creatures. The stories of the Buddha in the Jātaka -past lives- portray the Buddha as an animal with the virtues of kindness and self-sacrifice, which humanizes animals and criticizes cruelty. The Lankavatara Sūtra (Mahayana) is a fierce reproach of meat-eating: "To the love of purity, the Bodhisattva... does not eat any meat, and this is because it causes the beings to have fear and to violate compassion (Nigam & Chandra, 2026).

In addition to ahimsa, Buddhist animal ethics are found in the mindfulness of interdependence (pratītyasamutpāda), in which all phenomena are conditionally presented, and in which enslaving humans and animals in causal webs — har — ng one harms the entire system. Ethical development through bodhicitta (enlightened mind) in Mahayana inspires bodhisattvas to fulfill their duties to liberate everyone, including animals, from suffering. Buddhism decries the practice of animal sacrifice (that was prevalent in Vedic regions) as one that brings about bad karma and hinders enlightenment (Finnigan, 2017).

Asian animal welfare movements are manifested in modern interpretations. The revival of Buddhism in China also drives vegetarian restaurants, animal release (fangsheng) activities, and sanctuaries; societies propagate husheng (protecting life) in the context of environmental issues. Anti-cruelty laws and vegetarianism are promoted in lay and monastic activity in Sri Lanka and Thailand. Compassionate Tibetan leaders such as the 17th Karmapa espouse vegetarianism. These activities combine tradition with modern veganism and ecology, where animal protection is considered part of alleviating dukkha worldwide (Tarocco, 2023; Shambhala, 2023).

Hindu Thought: Contextual Ahimsa, Dharma, and Sacred Ecology

Ahimsa (nonviolence) is an ethical principle based on dharma (duty/righteousness) in Hindu thought, and it evolves over time, taking various forms in its treatment of animals. Hinduism has pragmatized situational ethics, combined with sacred symbolism and cosmic interdependence, whereas in other religions, such as Jainism and Buddhism, ethics are either absolute or pragmatic.

Animal ethics has evolved since the Vedic era (c. 1500-500 BCE) up to the post-Vedic era. Animal sacrifice (pasubandha) is described in early Vedic texts (such as the Rigveda) as part of a ritual honoring a deity, and cattle (go) are particularly useful in agriculture, milk, and sacrifice (e.g., hymns praise cows but allow the sacrifice; Dickstein, 2022). Both the Yajurveda and Atharvaveda contain allusions to animal sacrifice, which is evidence of a worldview that holds sacrificial killing as a way of keeping the cosmos in order. Nevertheless, changes in the Upanisads (c. 800-300 BCE) and epics take place after Vedic times, which signifies the shift to a more conducive approach to ahimsa. It is a virtue of non-harm to all beings (sarva-bhuta-ahimsa) that helps people escape the rebirth cycles, and the Chāndogya Upanisad encourages not harming any being, criticizes unnecessary violence, and correlates the right moral behaviour with the ability to avoid rebirth (Chāndogya Upanisad 3.17.4; PMC, 2020). This development indicates the spread of sramana (Jainism and Buddhism), agricultural stabilization, decreased slaughter at rites, and increased compassion.

The major idea is that the dharma is a matter of contextual obligation, which depends on caste (varna), stage of life (asrama), and circumstance, rather than absolutism. Reincarnation (samsara) assumes continuity between man and animal through karma, hierarchies between species are blurred, and they are all given the same moral position. Animals, especially the cow (go), are associated with maternal care, the earth (bhumi), and the provision of the deities; cow protection (go-raksa) symbolizes moral worship. Such avatars as Varaha (boar) and Krishna (cowherd) are divine-human-animal interdependent, and Krishna as Gopala (cows' nurturer) strengthens reverence (Krishna, 2010; Valpey, 2020).

Customs are different: Vaisnavism and some Brahmin caste practices consider meat, and more so beef, to be impure or violent, whereas other religions may use fish or poultry within the dharma context. The Bhagavad Gītā presents arguments in which Krishna encourages sattvic (pure) foods, including vegetarian foods that enhance clarity, over rajasic or tamasic foods, although it does not universally enforce vegetarianism (Bhagavad Gītā 17.8-10). The Manu Smṛti (Dharmasastra) allows meat for religious purposes but cautions against unnecessary harm; meat-eating is punished by karma and recommends moderation (Manu Smṛti 5.48-56; arguments about exceptions and perfect non-harm).

The Rigveda (sacrificial hymns), Chāndogya Upanisad (ethical non-harm), Bhagavad Gītā (dietary ethics in dharma-yoga), the Dharmasastras (e.g., Manu Smṛti on lawful/ritual allowances), and

Puranas (e.g., Bhagavata Purana in praise of cow protection and animal-deity relationships) are the texts most discussed as primary sources.

In addition to ahimsa, Hindu animal ethics is also the cosmic order (rta), described as the natural law that promotes harmony between beings. Prakriti (nature/matter) is divine energy, and is dependent upon purusa (spirit); humans and animals are a part of this web, and the exploitation of nature throws the balance off, preventing moksha (liberation). The dependence of humans and animals facilitates spiritual development - caring for animals cleanses karma and upholds dharma - and ecological holism, in which respect for nature (Prakriti as goddess) leads to sustainability (Dwivedi, as cited in many sources; Valpey, 2020).

These foundations are utilized by modern Hindu revivals, including Mahatma Gandhi, who connected ahimsa with animal rights. Gandhi regarded cow protection as a symbol of caring for the helpless; he applied nonviolence to animal abuse, meat consumption, and vivisection, and he evaluated the morality of society through animal treatment, thereby influencing animal welfare laws and movements in India (Jena, 2017). Modern activism includes cow sanctuaries (gausalas), anti-cruelty activism, and eco-theology, which combines ancient veneration with eco-preservation.

Comparative Analysis: Similarities, Differences, and “Beyond Ahimsa”

The Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions have a strong moral commitment to ahimsa (nonviolence) toward animals, but they differ in their interpretations, scope, and philosophical extrapolations. This comparative study identifies similarities, major differences, nonviolence transcendence, and still-existing scholarly controversies.

Similarities are the continuity of karma between animals and humans, the denial of unnecessary cruelty, and the impact on vegetarian cultures. The three traditions all attest to the reality of rebirth (samsara), in which souls or consciousnesses pass through species due to karma, erasing strict human-animal distinctions (Kemmerer, 2012). Animals are living creatures that suffer, and they need to be protected against the ill effects of negative karma. This mutual disapproval of unnecessary violence has led to the common practice of vegetarianism, which is strict in Jainism, promoted in Buddhism, and observed in some branches of Hinduism, due to sympathy and interdependence (Caruana, 2020). These concepts have influenced animal welfare trends and ethical vegetarianism movements in South Asia.

The use of ahimsa and its extent are divergent. Jainism is an absolutist religion, prioritizing nonviolence (ahimsa paramo dharma) above all forms of life (including microorganisms), without exception, even in cases of self-defense, in extreme versions (Vallely, 2018). Buddhism is an approach of middle-way pragmatism, with a focus on intention and compassion (karunā) rather than strict rules; the practice of the threefold purity permits the consumption of meat as long as the intention is not to harm the consumer, but to develop the mind instead (Finnigan, 2017). Situational ethics in Hinduism are informed by the presence of dharma (contextual duty), allowing exceptions to rituals, caste, or necessity in Vedic times, but post-Vedic changes encourage greater non-harm (Krishna, 2010; Valpey, 2020). Scope differs: Jainism includes microscopic life (ekendriya beings), Buddhism includes sentient beings (sattva) that can suffer, and Hinduism usually includes symbolic reverence (e.g., sacred cows as representations of Prakriti) and practical allowances (Caruana, 2020).

These frameworks are enhanced by philosophical extensions outside ahimsa. Jain soul-based egalitarianism holds that there is an intrinsic equality of jīva (souls) among species, with harming any binding karma and hindering moksha; aparigraha (non-possession) means ecological restraint (Chapple, 2002). Buddhism's compassion-based mindfulness is grounded in pratīyasamutpāda (dependent arising), which fosters bodhicitta (an enlightened mind) so that all beings can be liberated from dukkha, and it criticizes exploitation through ethical awareness (Finnigan, 2017). Ecological holism based on Hindu dharma incorporates rta (cosmic order), Prakriti (nature as divine), and interdependent living between humans and animals as the key to harmony and spiritual development, and cow care as the symbol of stewardship (Valpey, 2020). These dimensions will go beyond avoidance of harm, providing positive obligations: soul purification (Jain), compassionate liberation (Buddhist), and cosmic balance (Hindu).

Academic discussions dispute whether these traditions aid the contemporary language of animal rights or are anthropocentric. It is argued that they are consistent with rights through karma-rebirth equality, and the non-anthropocentric reasons are more powerful than utilitarianism in the West (Adamson, 2023; Kemmerer, 2012). Others observe that anthropocentrism has not yet been eliminated; humans are born with greater liberation potential, and responsibilities tend to fulfil human spiritual ambitions rather than animal rights as such (Caruana, 2020). Jain absolutism seems most in tune with rights-based perspectives, but even then, preservation is based on self-interest and karma. Buddhism, pragmatism, and Hindu contextualism oppose the right of universalism, where situational ethics take precedence over the right to the abstract. The

modern literature mediates these to global discourses, in which interfaith animal welfare has potential, but Indic ideas should not be overlaid with Western ideas (Valpey, 2020).

The comparative analysis of animal ethics in Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions reveals both profound convergences and instructive divergences. Rather than treating these traditions as isolated repositories of *ahiṃsā*, this section advances a sustained argument: Indic philosophies collectively articulate an interdependent, karmic non-anthropocentrism that surpasses dominant Western frameworks—such as rights-based individualism (Regan, 1983) or sentience-focused utilitarianism (Singer, 1975)—in addressing systemic exploitation. By integrating karmic continuity, relational compassion, and cosmic stewardship, these traditions position animals as co-participants in moral and ecological webs, offering practical and spiritual resources for contemporary crises like factory farming and biodiversity loss. This analysis operationalizes the “Indic Relational Ethics of Flourishing” framework introduced earlier.

Table 1: Key Concepts in Indic Animal Ethics

Tradition	Moral Standing	Scope of Ahiṃsā	Positive Obligations Beyond Harm
Jainism	Soul (<i>jīva</i>) egalitarianism	Absolutist (incl. microbes)	Karmic reciprocity + <i>aparigraha</i> minimalism
Buddhism	Shared sentience & <i>duḥkha</i>	Pragmatic/intentional	Compassionate liberation via <i>bodhicitta</i> & interdependence
Hinduism	Symbolic/cosmic (<i>prakṛti</i>)	Contextual/dharmic	Stewardship through <i>ṛta</i> & <i>go-rakṣā</i>

Table 2: Modern Implications for Systemic Exploitation

Framework	Strength for Contemporary Issues	Contribution to Relational Ethics of Flourishing
Western Rights/Utilitarian	Focus on individual interests/suffering	Limited systemic/ecological integration
Indic Relational	Karmic interdependence + positive duties	Holistic response to factory farming & climate

Overall, *ahimsa* brings these traditions together by rejecting gratuitous harm. However, their extensions, egalitarianism, mindfulness, and holism, offer the resources of animal ethics, which are used to inform modern veganism, ecology, and rights action.

Contemporary Relevance and Applications

The Indic Relational Ethics of Flourishing offers distinctive resources for contemporary animal ethics by transcending the limitations of dominant Western frameworks. Unlike Tom Regan’s

rights-based approach, which emphasizes inherent value and subject-of-a-life criteria but often lacks deep motivational or spiritual grounding (Regan, 1983), Indic traditions provide karmic reciprocity and rebirth empathy. The Jain principle of *jīva* equality and *parasparopagraho jīvānām* fosters intrinsic species egalitarianism, motivating protection through long-term spiritual consequences rather than abstract rights alone.

Ethical theories of *ahimsa* and veganism, along with the Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu versions, continue to have a profound impact on global animal protection, veganism, and environmental ethics activism. These ancient principles form the basis of important animal welfare legislation in India. Article 51A(g) of the Constitution, inserted in 1976, requires its citizens to conserve and enrich the natural environment and to be compassionate toward living creatures, citing the Indic tradition of nonviolence (Tarabout, 2019). This has guided legislations like the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (1960), Wildlife Protection Act (1972), and state-level prohibitions on cow slaughter as a legacy of *ahimsa* that focuses on compassion over exploitation (Krishna, 2022). These concepts are inspiring veganism and interfaith environmental ethics, in which Jain strict vegetarianism, Buddhist compassion, and Hindu respect for sacred animals drive plant-based lifestyles and environmental care in response to climate catastrophes (Kemmerer, 2012).

Nevertheless, contemporary problems undermine the uniformity of use. The rapid industrialization and urbanization processes have led to increased factory farming, the exploitation of dairy products, and habitat destruction, which conflict with traditional non-harm ideals (Chakraborty, 2017). There are also cultural adaptations: with vegetarianism continuing within a variety of communities, the force of economic globalization has pushed toward the use of meat, which contradicts the apparent ethics and behaviours. Criticism has focused on hypocrisy, e.g., ritual exceptions or selective reverence (cows but not other animals), and vigilante violence in cow protection movements, sometimes sacrificing the real welfare to cultural symbolism (Human Rights Watch, 2019). These tensions show how *ahimsa* resists the commodification of a market-focused world.

Nevertheless, these traditions can make significant contributions to policy and philosophical discussion despite challenges. They offer guidelines for anti-cruelty legislation that emphasize compassion and interdependence, which may enhance the implementation of existing laws or lead to new statutes on biodiversity protection. Indic perspectives can be added to Western animal ethics (utilitarianism) and rights-based animal ethics (focus on the inherent value of subjects-of-a-life) to provide non-anthropocentric concepts of liberation across species,

emphasizing karmic continuity, soul equality, and ecological holism (Adamson, 2023; Finnigan, 2017).

Practical applications are presented in case studies. Jain-based panjrapoles (animal shelters) continue to operate in India, sheltering thousands of strays, injured, or old animals (e.g., the Bombay Panjrapole since 1834) as an expression of absolute ahimsa by providing lifelong refuge and never exploiting any animals (Arihanta Institute, 2024). In Asia (e.g., in China and Nepal), Buddhist monasteries rescue abandoned pets and promote veganism; among them is the temple of Ven. Zhi Xian, where thousands of cats and dogs live, and projects like Animal Liberation Sanctuaries in the area of Kopan Monastery (Buddhistdoor, 2021). Hindu cow-protection movements, such as gausalas and contemporary revolutions in the Gandhi tradition, promote the sanctuary approach and anti-slaughter legislation, albeit some have been accused of being politicized (Valpey, 2020).

The Indic Relational Ethics of Flourishing can enrich environmental justice, One Health initiatives, and decolonial ethics by offering non-anthropocentric tools for biodiversity conservation, sustainable food systems, and interfaith dialogue on climate action. Integrating these perspectives into global policy and education can counter industrial exploitation with interdependent, spiritually motivated care.

These illustrations show how Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu animal ethics have long remained relevant, not forgotten, as they have adjusted ancient wisdom to modern crises and contributed to the creation of compassion in the world (Ranganathan, n.d.).

Conclusion

The discussion of animal ethics in the Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions underscores the great moral and spiritual importance placed on the lives of nonhumans in Indian philosophy. The main element in this discussion is the idea of ahimsa, or nonviolence, which emerges as a strand in all of these traditions, yet is interpreted and put into practice in different ways. In Jainism, ahimsa is held as the highest ethical ideal, and this abstinence from harming is required even toward the smallest living being. Though Buddhism is also devoted to compassion (*prācāya*) and non-harm, animal ethics is situated within the broader context of the Eightfold Path and the development of mindfulness, as all sentient beings depend on one another. Animal ethics are incorporated into Hindu thought as varied and stratified by dharma, karma, and respect for sacred animals, balancing ritual, symbolic, and ecological aspects.

All these traditions, combined, express a vision of moral obligation that goes beyond human-centered morality. They challenge us to acknowledge animals not only as resources but as members of the moral world, who warrant care, respect, and protection. Notably, such views also echo modern arguments on ecological sustainability, animal rights, and environmental justice. In the age of industrial exploitation and ecological crisis, the Indian tradition of ahimsa and compassion is a counter-narrative of restraint, reverence, and interconnectedness.

References

- Adamson, P. (2023). Indian animal ethics. *Think*, 22(63), 47–52.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175622000227>
- Akbarsha, M. A. (2010). Mahatma Gandhi–Doerenkamp Center for Alternatives to Use of Animals in Life Science Education. *ALTEX*, 27(3), 3043344.
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3043344/>
- Arihanta Institute. (2024, May 21). *Panjrapole: The Jain animal sanctuary*.
<https://www.arihantainstitute.org/blog/97-panjrapole-the-jain-animal-sanctuary>
- — —. (2025, February 11). *Jain compassion & nonviolence toward animals*.
<https://www.arihantainstitute.org/blog/121-jain-compassion-nonviolence-toward-animals>
- Britannica. (n.d.). Ahimsa. In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/ahimsa>
- Buddhistdoor. (2021, October 15). *Buddhist monk in China saves thousands of abandoned animals*.
<https://www.buddhistdoor.net/news/buddhist-monk-in-china-saves-thousands-of-abandoned-animals>
- Caruana, L. (2020). Different religions, different animal ethics? *Animal Frontiers*, 10(1), 8–14.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/af/vfz060>
- Chakraborty, R. (2017). Animal ethics and India: Understanding the connection through the capabilities approach. *Bangladesh Journal of Bioethics*, 8(1), 33–43.
<https://doi.org/10.3329/bioethics.v8i1.31229>
- Chapple, C. K. (2002). *Jainism and ecology: Nonviolence in the web of life*. Harvard University Press.
- Damodran, K. (1969). India: Hindu World: An Encyclopaedic Survey of Hinduism by Benjamin Walker. 2 V. George Allen and Unwin, London. 1968. 609, 696 p. 2 Gns per set. [Review of the book *Hindu world: An encyclopaedic survey of Hinduism*, by B. Walker]. *India Quarterly*:

A Journal of International Affairs, 25(2), 173–177.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/097492846902500208>

Dickstein, J. (2022). *Animals in Hindu South Asia: From cosmos to slaughterhouse* (Publication No. 9113r4n9) [Doctoral dissertation, University of California]. eScholarship.

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9113r4n9>

Finnigan, B. (2017). Buddhism and animal ethics. *Philosophy Compass*, 12(7), Article e12424.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12424>

Hossain, J. (2025). *Culture and spirituality as pathways for promoting animal ethics: A study of the principles of Hinduism and Buddhism in Bengal* [Unpublished manuscript].

Human Rights Watch. (2019, February 19). *Violent cow protection in India: Vigilante groups attack minorities*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/02/19/violent-cow-protection-india/vigilante-groups-attack-minorities>

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/02/19/violent-cow-protection-india/vigilante-groups-attack-minorities>

Jacobi, H. (Trans.). (1884). *Jaina sutras: Part I – The Ācārāṅga Sūtra*. Oxford University Press.

Jena, N. P. (2017). Gandhi's perspective on nonviolence and animals: Ethical theory and moral practice. *Journal of Global Ethics*, 14(1), 1–15.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2018.1425216>

Kemmerer, L. (2012). *Animals and world religions*. Oxford University Press.

Krishna, N. (2010). *Sacred animals of India*. Penguin Books India.

— — —. (2022). *Animal sentience in Indian culture*. WellBeing International Studies Repository.

<https://www.wellbeingintludiesrepository.org/animsent/1751/>

Lombardi, N. (2025). Jainism beyond Jainism: Jain contributions to animal ethics and ecology. *Samyak: An Undergraduate Journal of Jain Studies*.

<https://journals.library.unt.edu/index.php/sujjs/article/view/302>

Nigam, A., & Chandra, S. (2026). Revisiting Dharma in ancient Indian knowledge tradition and jurisprudential inquiry: A textual-based analysis. *Asian Journal of Legal Education*, 13(1), 30

46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23220058251234567>

Pew Research Center. (2021, June 29). *Religion and food*.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/06/29/religion-and-food>

Ranganathan, B. (n.d.). The moral status of animals reflected in Jain and Hindu traditions.

Discussions, 15.

- Shambhala. (2023, October 2). *Animals in Buddhism: What is the Buddhist view of animal rights?*
<https://shambhala.org/community/blog/animals-in-buddhism-what-is-the-buddhist-view-of-animal-rights>
- Tarabout, G. (2019). Compassion for living creatures in Indian law courts. *Religions*, 10(6), Article 383. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10060383>
- Tarocco, F. (2023). Animal protection (*busheng*) and ethical eating practices in contemporary Chinese Buddhism. *Entangled Religions*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.46586/ER.10.2023.112>
- Umāsvāti. (n.d.). *Tattvārtha Sūtra* (Various translations). Wisdom Library.
<https://www.wisdomlib.org/jainism/book/tattvartha-sutra-with-commentary>
- Vallely, A. (2018). Exploring the human/nonhuman animal divide within Jainism. *Society & Animals*, 26(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685306-12341500>
- Valpey, K. (2004). Animal rights and Ahimsa: An ancient discourse on humans, animals, and the earth. *Nidan: International Journal for Indian Studies*, 16, 53–69.
- Valpey, K. R. (2020). *Cow care in Hindu animal ethics*. Palgrave Macmillan.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28408-4>



FDI in E-Commerce in India: A Policy Perspective

Dr. Paromita Chakraborty

Assistant Professor

Department of Political Science

Surendranath College

Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Abstract

The article explores a relatively new policy of FDI in multi-brand retail in India, which is constantly evolving. In this context, the article focuses on the recently introduced e-commerce policy in India. The study is significant because it examines the responses of primarily unorganized retailers in India, who are vital to the policy-making process in the Indian economy. The article aims to analyze the highly competitive and contested e-commerce space in India, particularly the entry of FDI into the e-commerce domain and the broader debates it generated. In general, the retail FDI policy has raised concerns that the entry of foreign firms like Amazon into India would adversely affect unorganized retailers. Those supporting the policy in India, however, stated that the entry of foreign retailers into the market will provide greater consumer choice and improve the Indian economy in the long run. The article tries to ask two major questions. What are the repercussions and debates of the new FDI in e-commerce policy? What are the responses of the unorganized retail sector in India concerning the entry of FDI in the vast, emerging, and economically lucrative e-commerce space in India? Hence, the primary agenda of the article is to analyze the FDI in e-commerce policy and to understand the responses and debates it has generated.



Received: 23.02.2026

Accepted: 03.06.2026

Published: 15.06.2026

CJHSSC, Volume: 2

Issue: 1, June 2026

Page: 143 - 157

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20719367>

Corresponding Author: paromita.jnu@gmail.com

Copyright: Author © 2026



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Published by: Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College,
Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

Available at: www.ssjalangirlscollege.org.in/journal.php
Email: confluence.sjgc@gmail.com

Keywords: E-commerce, Policy, Unorganized Retailers, Foreign Direct Investment.

Introduction

This article primarily focuses on the recently announced changes to India's FDI in e-commerce policy, particularly the economic implications of the critical changes introduced by the Government. The study is significant because there is much academic literature on public policy in sectors such as Telecom, Education, Health, and Welfare programs; however, little attention is paid to FDI, particularly its use in the e-commerce retail sector. Public policy analysis is central to the discipline of political science (Mathur, 2013). If one looks at studies of various economic policies, one can see that they have focused mainly on the design of choices and less on the way policy decisions were arrived at (Mathur, 2013). What was lost in this approach was the recognition that policy-making involves bargaining and compromise; in short, it is about politics. Building on this notion, one can say that political dynamics and contestations have persisted to this day. In this backdrop, it is significant to analyse the issue of the Government's recently announced e-commerce policy (Mathur, 2013).

As the eminent economist, Sukhamoy Chakravarty, stated, 'issues that bear upon India's developmental prospects are inevitably very complex' (Mathur, 2013: Introduction). 'Moreover, they cannot be devised by technocratically inclined civil servants.' (Mathur, 2013: Introduction) If one examines the study of the country's policy process, one finds that it has been largely overlooked by scholars in academia today. In retailing, one finds a pre-eminent position in the economics of all modern societies, and it is undoubtedly true that the pace of development within retailing appears to be increasing. The organised retail sector in India has also been witnessing changes over the last couple of years, particularly in the e-commerce domain (Kumar, Patwari & Ayush, 2008). It is mostly economists who have discussed this field, but the politics of the policy-making process by various governments in this area and its impact have not been adequately addressed.

If one looks at the unorganised retail sector in India, it is the small, independent Kirana stores that are the second-largest employer after agriculture, accounting for around 42 million jobs and 14 percent of GDP. These stores primarily use their family labour. So, any policy changes that affect the structure of grocery retail in India are invariably linked to development and poverty reduction (Dufey, Grieg-Gran & Ward, 2008). In this analysis, a political economy perspective on reforms is critical because politics and institutions intervene between policies and outcomes (Mukherji, 2014). Hence, it is important to understand that politics and contestation remain embedded in our country's policy-making process, and public policies also depend on

responses from its various stakeholders. The questions also highlight that the issue of FDI in the retail sector remains controversial, and there is ongoing resistance among several stakeholders to its entry, particularly in the e-commerce space. Regarding the FDI in the e-commerce sector policy, one can also see that interests, conflicts, and stakes are at play, which will significantly shape the understanding of the policy's future impact. Hence, the impacts and interests of various stakeholders in India, particularly unorganised retailers, need to be taken into account to draw a comprehensive sketch of the FDI in e-commerce policy.

Sources and Methodology

This paper aims to analyse the potential consequences of the recently introduced e-commerce policy on the Indian retail sector. The primary research question guiding this paper is, how is the recent policy of 100% FDI in the e-commerce sector in India expected to impact the Indian retail sector? (Shah, 2018). What are the responses of the unorganised retailers regarding this policy? Hence, it is important to investigate the potential impact of this recent policy. (Shah, 2018)

Since the policy is a recent development, its impact cannot yet be measured, but it is important to analyse its consequences to get a sense of where the policy change is leading (Shah, 2018). The data for this study are drawn from secondary sources. These sources include publications and reports by intergovernmental organisations, newspaper articles and other media publications in print and/or online, and media discussions and analysis by industry experts and government advisors (Shah, 2018). The lack of secondary sources for a relatively new policy is also a limitation of this paper.

FDI in E-Commerce in India

The term 'Foreign Direct Investment' refers to capital transferred from one nation to expand production in another nation. According to the OECD, FDI is an investment that involves a long-term relationship and shows a long-term interest and control by a resident entity in one economy in a business that is based in a different economy than the resident entity (FDI enterprise or affiliate enterprise or foreign affiliate) (Rajappa, 2022). The literature generally agrees that the Government plays a critical role in determining a country's FDI policies, as these policies will guide how a country advances with incoming and outgoing foreign investment. The Government can influence this by either imposing restrictions and strict laws on certain sectors or by relaxing laws and providing incentives for foreign investors to invest in those sectors of the

host country's economy (Shah, 2018).

Over the past half-century, governments of developing economies have tended to liberalise their laws, regulations, and rules governing the admission and establishment of foreign investment projects in their countries (Shah, 2018). Foreign direct investment brings certain benefits and costs with it for the home (source) countries and host (recipient) countries. Concerning job loss, investments made abroad by MNCs lead to a loss of jobs in the domestic economy and take away potential job creation scenarios with them. This is especially the case when FDI is seen as a substitute for domestic production (Shah, 2018). The host country can also discourage foreign investment by imposing import tariffs and high tax rates. On the other hand, governments can also adopt a more lenient approach in their foreign policy and open certain sectors of the economy to foreign investment. This can be done by giving tax benefits, grants, subsidies, and investment incentives to foreign investors. It is within that realm that e-commerce, in particular, has come to occupy an important position, especially in developing nations worldwide (Shah, 2018).

An e-commerce activity is defined in the existing FDI policy as 'an activity of buying and selling by a company through an e-commerce platform' (Banerjee, 2016, p. 21). Companies and individuals may purchase and sell products and services online, which is known as e-commerce. E-commerce platforms are today more important to the success of businesses as they compete for customers who prefer to shop online. The rise in popularity of online shopping may be attributed to the fact that doing so is not only easy but also quite convenient. Because shopping online was so convenient, consumers could complete their purchases at their leisure (Rajappa, 2022). Since its inception in the 1970s, e-commerce has undergone substantial development. It claimed worldwide popularity during the late 1990s and early 2000s when it experienced a period of extreme growth in the importance and usage of the internet by businesses and consumers (Shah, 2018).

The advent of e-commerce has indeed transformed the way business is done in India. Today, the sector has reached approximately US\$20 billion in value. Moreover, according to a 2016 Morgan Stanley research report, the Indian e-commerce sector is expected to grow to US\$120 billion by 2020 and hit US\$200 billion by 2026 (Shah, 2018). According to recent reports, domestic Indian companies such as Flipkart, Snapdeal, Paytm, and the MNC Amazon India were the largest e-commerce companies in India, with a combined market share of 90% (Shah, 2018). The unorganised retailers, however, stated that these e-commerce retailers have

begun to exploit the market, which is affecting the local retailers by maintaining aggressive discounts, ownership control, and market shares (Rajappa, 2022). This recent introduction of policy reforms in the e-commerce sector has raised fears among industry experts that the policy has the potential to have negative implications in the Indian market. (Shah, 2018)

The e-commerce policy in India

Looking at the policy, the Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion (DIPP) issued fresh foreign direct investment (FDI) guidelines in March 2016 through a press note (PN3/16) for the e-commerce sector. These guidelines were incorporated into the Consolidated FDI Policy, 2016 (Banerjee, 2016). Recently, the Government issued new guidelines for FDI that permitted up to 100% in e-commerce activities. Before reviewing the policy, key terms associated with retail trading need to be reviewed to understand the FDI policy.

There are primarily four key e-commerce market segments: B2B (business-to-business), B2C (business-to-consumer), C2C (consumer-to-consumer), and C2B (consumer-to-business) (Rajappa, 2022). The FDI in e-commerce policy, however, covered only B2B trade, not retail trade in B2C. (Business-to-Consumer in e-commerce is a transaction between an enterprise and end consumers.) B2C trading, however, was permitted in limited ways, such as when a manufacturer in India could sell online (Sharma, 2015).

The e-commerce business is primarily divided into two major categories:

- (i) Marketplace model and
- (ii) Inventory-based model (Sharma, 2015).

A marketplace-based model of e-commerce involves an e-commerce entity providing an information technology platform on a digital network to act as a facilitator between buyers and sellers. The inventory-based model of e-commerce is one in which e-commerce entities own the inventory of goods and services and sell them directly to consumers (Shah, 2018).

Looking at the FDI in retail policy until 2016, FDI in e-commerce was not allowed for single-brand or multi-brand retail companies. The Government only allowed 100% FDI in B2B e-commerce but not in B2C e-commerce. Since B2C e-commerce was not allowed, Amazon, Flipkart, ShopClues, etc., had to change their business models to operate as B2B marketplaces in India (Gulati, 2020). However, that changed in March 2016 when the Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion (DIPP) introduced new reforms, which allowed 100% FDI in B2C e-commerce under the automatic route in the marketplace-based model of e-commerce. This included a faster clearance window and no prior approval from the Foreign Investment

Promotion Board (FIPB) for foreign investors (Shah, 2018). However, it was in 2019 that the Government announced major changes to the foreign direct investment policy for the e-commerce sector to appease domestic trade bodies in India. The changes to the policy were effective from 1st February 2019. Under the policy, certain restrictions were placed on e-commerce firms. Primary among them was the Government barring online marketplaces like Flipkart and Amazon from selling products of companies in which they hold stakes, and also banning their exclusive marketing arrangements that could influence product prices. The policy also stated that all firms had to offer equal services or facilities to all their vendors without discrimination (*The Economic Times*, Dec 26, 2018).

According to the policy, an e-commerce entity could also not allow more than 25% of the sales transacted on its marketplace to come from a single vendor or its group companies (*The Economic Times*, Dec 26, 2018). Hence, as per the policy, Flipkart and Amazon could not exercise ownership or control over inventory. They had to provide services such as warehousing, logistics, and advertising to all sellers fairly. The new FDI rules clearly stated that an online marketplace could not sell products from a vendor in which they have a stake. For example, Amazon and Flipkart purchased goods in bulk at cheap rates from manufacturers through their wholesale entities, Amazon Wholesale and Flipkart India Pvt Ltd, and sold them on the marketplaces through their preferred sellers, which generally were companies in which the e-commerce company or a group entity may have had an equity stake (Anand, 2019).

The responses to the policy were mixed. Flipkart co-founder Binny Bansal criticised the revised framework for foreign investment in the Indian e-commerce sector, saying small startups and early-stage companies were being adversely hit by the new rules (Sharma, 2019). Bansal stated that big companies would be able to navigate through the new policy as they have access to capital, but smaller startups would suffer in the long run (Sharma, 2019). There was opposition in the government quarters as well. Former Niti Aayog chief executive Amitabh Kant stated that the Government should not focus on micro issues such as discounts and pricing, but instead on attracting investments and creating jobs in the retail sector (*The Economic Times*, Aug 15, 2018). Hence, strongly supporting a competitive e-commerce sector, Kant stated that India needed a progressive and forward-looking e-commerce policy that would promote startups, investment, and growth, and create new jobs (*The Economic Times*, Aug 15, 2018). Confederation of All India Traders (CAIT) welcomed the move; however, they stated certain underlying problems remained. The domestic trade bodies stated that, despite guidelines given in the policy, the growing advent of the e-commerce sector, especially international giants like Amazon, had

begun to exploit the market, which in turn was affecting the local retailers by maintaining aggressive discounts, ownership control, and market shares (Rajappa, 2022).

Hence, one can say that the introduction of the recent e-commerce policy has significantly changed the market conditions in the retail sector in India. Though the recent changes that the Government made in the e-commerce policy showed signs of reducing predatory pricing, and raised hopes of achieving a level playing field in the Indian retail market, the policy, however, could not eliminate the negative implications, like the reappearance of fraudulent transactions, and the continuous violation of rules that the foreign retailers were engaging in. In the end, despite the Government's best efforts, it could not pacify the unorganised retailers in India (Shah, 2018).

The Response: Unorganised Retailers

The E-commerce sector in India today has become a new battleground between brick-and-mortar retailers and online players. Looking at the data according to a report from property consultant Knight Frank India Pvt Ltd and Retailers Association of India (RAI), the share of e-commerce retail was a meagre 2% of the total retail market in 2014, however, it was expected to grow to 11% by 2019, while the share of organised traditional retail is expected to shrink from 17% to 13% in the same period (Shah, 2018).

Many scholars, such as Yadav and Jauhari (2012), stated that the perceived consequences of increasing the FDI threshold in the Indian retail sector 'will lead to widespread closure of small and traditional retail outlets, a sharp decline of the non-formal sector, and undermining of livelihood and employment opportunities' (Shah, 2018, p. 30). It was also noted that FDI would cater only to the needs of the wealthy, with adverse effects on employment in this industry (Shah, 2018). Lakatos and Fukui (2014) also analysed the effects of opening up multi-brand retailing to foreign investment in India in their research study. They deduced that 'the unilateral reduction of barriers to FDI in distribution services in India benefits the economy as a whole, consumers, and foreign producers but hurts domestic distributors.' (Shah, 2018, p.30)

However, the major opposition to international e-commerce retailers came from Indian traders' bodies. Industry bodies raised concerns about what they say are the unregulated and unethical practices of e-commerce and quick commerce companies in India. In particular, they objected to 'predatory pricing' and 'deep discounting' by these companies, which they said violated FDI regulations. (*The Economic Times*, April 22, 2025)

The Problems

The retail lobby of the unorganised retailers in India, such as the CAIT and the Swadeshi Jagran Manch, stated that e-commerce websites were adopting unfair means to grow their business, which, in turn, was resulting in the diversion of their customers to the e-commerce market (*The Economic Times*, Sep 23, 2017). Praveen Khandelwal, CAIT secretary general and Member of Parliament said that e-commerce and quick commerce platforms were more focused on boosting their valuations than doing genuine business. (*The Economic Times*, April 22, 2025). ‘Quick commerce companies have received over Rs 54,000 crore in FDI, yet only 2.5% has been invested in infrastructure’ (*The Economic Times*, April 22, 2025). ‘The majority of the funds have been diverted towards covering losses, predatory pricing, deep discounting, and subsidised services for a few preferred sellers,’ he said. (*The Economic Times*, April 22, 2025)

Trade bodies such as Swadeshi Jagran Manch and Confederation of All India Traders (CAIT) stated that the foreign players were using the e-commerce route to circumvent rules to monopolise the Indian market. The entry of foreign retail giants such as Amazon and Flipkart would ultimately eliminate small and medium businesses and the small neighbourhood shops (Guruswamy, Sharma, Mohanty, & Kohra, 2005). Unorganised retailers, in particular, stated that they had been suffering losses of nearly 50% during the festive season, due to discounts offered by groups such as Amazon and Flipkart. According to estimates by the All India Mobile Retailers Association, more than 30,000 brick-and-mortar store traders have shut shop since the 2019 festive season due to pricing pressure, which, according to the trade bodies, was killing offline trade (Lochab, 2020). There were also various complaints from domestic trade bodies about the abuse of market rules by e-commerce retailers.

Retail lobbies in India also stated that foreign MNEs were violating Indian laws. The Delhi Vyapar Mahasangh (DVM), an affiliate of the CAIT in 2020, had approached the CCI alleging abuse of market dominance and competition law violations by Flipkart and Amazon. The petitions alleged that these platforms encouraged the sellers to become red vendors and only promoted these preferred vendors on their platforms, which impacted non-preferred sellers. It also alleged that e-commerce platforms such as Amazon and Flipkart owned stakes in these online vendors on their platforms, which was not allowed under foreign investment rules on e-commerce (*The Economic Times*, May 31, 2022).

CAIT secretary, Praveen Khandelwal, stated that FDI in e-commerce would eventually act as a backdoor entry for global retailers to bypass restrictions in multi-brand retail, as there

were no geographical restrictions in e-commerce. Similarly, Swadeshi Jagaran Manch (SJM) co-convenor Ashwani Mahajan also disagreed with the move, saying that the policy reforms would allow e-commerce entities to legally engage in predatory pricing and other business malpractices. The traders' body stated that this move would ultimately reward online companies rather than punish them for their unfair business practices (Shah, 2018). There were also concerns about the large-scale foreign acquisition of e-commerce firms. As stated earlier, the unrest primarily started against the foreign retailers after the Walmart-Flipkart deal. US retail giant Wal-Mart acquired a 77% stake in Flipkart in its biggest takeover to date. The deal valued the 11-year-old Indian e-commerce firm at \$20.8 billion (*The Economic Times*, May 29, 2018). The Wal-Mart-Flipkart deal raised concerns among unorganised retailers regarding the possibility of predatory pricing and small enterprises going out of business.

An objection petition was also filed by the Competition Commission of India (CCI) against the Wal-Mart-Flipkart deal by the CAIT (*The Economic Times*, May 29, 2018). In response, Walmart had also filed caveats in multiple high courts across the country to pre-empt trade organisations, the Confederation of All India Traders and Swadeshi Jagran Manch, from obtaining any interim order against the US retailer's \$16-billion acquisition of e-commerce marketplace Flipkart, without it getting a chance to present its side. Traders' body CAIT also filed a complaint with the Competition Commission of India against retail giant Amazon, accusing the e-commerce major of committing fraud while seeking approval of More's retail takeover in India (*The Economic Times*, January, 25, 2022). Amazon and Samara Alternative Investment Fund were buying up the retail supermarket chain in a ₹4,200 crore deal (*The Economic Times*, January 25, 2022).

The Confederation of All India Traders claimed that the CCI was also misled in the case of the takeover of Future Retail in India. 'It amply exposes the sinister designs of Amazon to control Indian retail companies fraudulently to capture the physical retail trade and inventory-based e-commerce in India, causing enormous harm to the traders' (*The Economic Times*, January 25, 2022), the trader's body alleged. CAIT Secretary General Praveen Khandelwal also stated that by placing large advertisements in the media, companies were attempting to address consumers directly, which was also a violation of the FDI guidelines (*The Economic Times*, Sep 23, 2017). The unorganised retailers also showed that the Chinese e-commerce companies were trying to circumvent the Indian laws. Swadeshi Jagran Manch (SJM) also protested against the new market for Chinese e-commerce apps, stating that they are making inroads into India discreetly. The SJM also assessed that Chinese e-commerce firms bagged an estimated 2 lakh orders per day

from Indian shoppers, and they were delivering goods via couriers and postal shipments, bypassing and evading a range of Indian laws on payment gateways, customs duties, and GST (Vishnoi, 2018).

Besides these issues, there is another important aspect of food retail and e-commerce in India. One knows that food retail accounts for a substantial share of e-commerce players due to the high demand for daily staples and groceries. Hence, unorganised retailers in the country sought regulation of food retail in the e-commerce sector. It was not at all addressed in the e-commerce policy. If one looks at Amazon particularly, it has recently expanded its wholly owned food retail business, Amazon Retail India, as the main seller of food and grocery products on the marketplace's online supermarket, Amazon Pantry. Amazon Pantry has markets with Amazon Retail India as the seller for staples like pulses, rice, atta, edible oil, biscuits, instant noodles, snacks, and savouries (Mukherjee and Anand, 2019). Hence, many traders in India have taken exception to Amazon's expansion in the food retail sector in India and stated that it should also come under the revised guidelines of the new e-commerce policy. However, the Government clarified that companies with foreign direct investment (FDI) in food retail could continue to sell through e-commerce. Hence, food retail would be outside the purview of the curbs in the e-commerce FDI policy, according to a clarification issued by the erstwhile Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion (DIPP). 'There is no change in the FDI policy on food product retail trading, which permits 100% FDI under the approval route, including through e-commerce, in respect of food products manufactured and/or produced in India' (Mukherjee and Anand, 2019).

Hence, despite certain regulations and restrictions in the e-commerce space, the domestic trade bodies, such as CAIT and the Swadeshi Jagran Manch, are protesting against the abuse of power by foreign retailers and still have their demands unfulfilled.

Conclusion

Policymakers in India are wary of making changes involving the retail sector that might harm small businesses, which could adversely affect employment. Nevertheless, at the same time, they are also seeking ways to promote greater efficiency and productivity in a growing sector of the economy that presently accounts for 37% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) (Kohli and Bhagwati, 2011). While attempting to meet the latter objective, the infusion of foreign direct investment across all segments of the retail business is presented as the most significant step. Therefore, policy changes are being proposed to invite global retailers into India.

The last few decades have seen significant changes in the international investment landscape, and foreign direct investment (FDI) has remained an integral part of it. Since the turn of the century, with an increase in the importance and usage of the internet by businesses, the digital platforms of e-commerce have transformed the way firms conduct business across international borders. However, the developing economies of the world face an important decision today: whether to limit the competition from foreign companies and, eventually, their negative effects. Although some consensus exists on the positive impact of FDI on the host country's economy, many scholars have also been critical of FDI in terms of its negative impact on domestic economies and societies (Shah, 2018).

As noted earlier, one of the major drawbacks of allowing FDI in a host country's economy is the increased competition in the market for local companies from foreign MNCs, thus resulting in an unstable market, small-scale local companies going out of business, and foreign MNCs monopolising the market (Shah, 2018). Additionally, studies by Haddad and Harrison (1993), Encarnation and Wells, Jr. (1986), and Wasow (2003) provided further supporting results that FDI had a negative net contribution to the host country's economy and that it failed to show a significant beneficial impact on the host country's economy and its domestic companies (Shah, 2018).

Foreign direct investment (FDI) has emerged as an integral part of the international investment landscape over the last few decades. It has become an important component of the development strategies of developing countries (Shah, 2018). It was found that the introduction of the new policy in the e-commerce sector has enabled various forms of anti-competitive conduct in the market. The overall implications of this policy have the potential to have negative economic effects on the Indian retail sector, which could also spill over to other sectors of the Indian economy (Shah, 2018). It is also true, and there is evidence in India and worldwide that large retailers could obtain favourable terms from manufacturers and other suppliers due to their financial clout and technological capacities. There is also evidence today that foreign firms are trying to gain a foothold in India through mergers and acquisitions, as well as slowly entering the food retail sector.

The recent takeover of Flipkart by multinational giant Walmart is further proof that the Indian Government needs to strengthen its FDI policies in the e-commerce and retail sector to safeguard its domestic companies. The global war between Amazon and Walmart has entered the boundaries of India, and the domestic Indian companies in this sector are at risk of either getting

acquired by powerful foreign MNCs or running out of business (Shah, 2018). The abuse of dominant positions by some companies is taking a toll on the sector, and such practices need to be brought under control with stronger policy frameworks in the e-commerce sector (Shah, 2018). One can see that the issue of FDI in multi-brand retail, particularly in the e-commerce sector, is a contested space. Even though the Government has tried to pacify unorganised retailers with policy modifications, who also continue to hold significant vote share in the Indian context, they remain sceptical and hostile to the influx of retail giants such as Walmart and Amazon into the e-commerce space in India. The issue of food retail remains to be addressed. Hence, regarding the FDI in the e-commerce sector, the Government should proceed with extreme caution and keep in mind the interests of the unorganised retailers of our country, who are a significant contributor to the country's economy.

There is no doubt that constant abuse and violation of rules, and problems of heavy discounting, exclusivity agreements, and fraudulent transactions have become prevalent in the e-commerce sector with the introduction of new policy reforms. While some of these issues also existed before, and the new policy reforms were introduced in part to address these issues, there is doubt that it will succeed in the future in putting a stop to these practices (Shah, 2018). Hence, the state should ensure that there is a certain level of playing field between the large e-commerce entities and the unorganised retailers by ensuring that predatory pricing and circumventing the rules of the country by foreign e-tailers are prevented. Unorganised retailers should also have access to advanced technological capabilities at affordable rates and to loans.

One should understand that reforms in any form are not merely about engaging with the world; they are about promoting and providing welfare for all (Mukherji, 2014). Though the Government attempted to provide certain safeguards for unorganised retailers in India, it has failed to provide any safety net for them in its e-commerce policies. The influx of foreign retailers into the e-commerce space indeed poses a threat to the millions of labourers engaged in the unorganised sector. It is imperative that the retail space be safeguarded from large MNCs, and that Indian policy-making reflect the interests of unorganised retailers.

References

Anand, S., & Mukherjee, W. (2019, Feb 07). Amazon Retail ups 'pantry' plays after clarity on FDI. *The Economic Times*. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/archive.cms>

Bailay, R. & Chakravarty, C. (2018, Aug 01). Wal-Mart, Amazon may rope in Trump admin to

counter Modi's nation-first ecommerce blueprint. *The Economic Times*.

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/archive.cms>

Banerjee, S. (2016). FDI Guidelines for e-Commerce Cobweb of the e-Marketplace Model.

Economic and Political Weekly, 51(36), 21-25

The Economic Times (2018, May 29). *CAIT Files Objection Petition against Walmart-Flipkart Deal*.

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/archive.cms>

The Economic Times (2022, January, 25). *CAIT: Amazon concealed facts for more retail takeover, misled*

CCI too. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/archive.cms>

The Economic Times (2022, May,31). *CCI wing probing dealings with ecomm cos and preferred sellers*.

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/archive.cms>

The Economic Times (2022, April 29). *CCI Raids top sellers of Amazon, other e-retailers*.

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/archive.cms>

The Economic Times (2017, Sep 23). *Discounts on Amazon, Flipkart and Snapdeal illegal, in violation of*

FDI rules: Traders' body. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/archive.cms>

Dufey, A., Grieg-Gran, M., & Halina, Ward H. (2008). *Responsible Enterprise, Foreign Direct*

Investment, and Investment Promotion: key issues in Attracting Investment for Sustainable

Development. International Institute for Environment and Development.

The Economic Times (2018, Aug 15). *E-commerce policy needs to focus on investments, not micro issues*

like discounts: Amitabh Kant. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/archive.cms>

The Economic Times (2024, Aug 22). *Goyal flays Amazon unchecked e commerce*.

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/archive.cms>

The Economic Times (2018, Dec 26). *Govt. tightens norms for etailers, bars exclusive deals*.

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/archive.cms>

The Economic Times (2024, Sep 29). *Govt considering foreign investment regulatory mechanism for FDI*

supervision. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/archive.cms>

The Economic Times (2024, Sep 29). *Govt considering foreign investment regulatory mechanism for FDI*

supervision. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/archive.cms>

- The Economic Times (2025, April 22). *Trade bodies decry 'unregulated' and 'unethical' practices*.
<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/archive.cms>
- Guruswamy M., Sharma K., Mohanty J.P., & Kohra T.J. (2005). FDI in India's retail sector, more bad than good? *Economic and Political Weekly*, 40 (7), 619-623.
- Gulati, Ankita. (2020). India's Draft E-Commerce Policy- Reading between the Lines.https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3659258
- Kohli, R. & Bhagwati, J. (2011). Organised Retailing in India: issues and outlook. (1), 1-26.
http://indiafdiwatch.org/fileadmin/India_site/CPAS_report_2.pdf/.
- Kumar V., Patwari Y., & Ayush H.N. (2008). Organized Food Retailing: A Blessing or a Curse? *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43 (20), 67-75.
- Lochab, H. (2020, Jan 09). CCI's 'soft view' on E-comm. rules irks phone retailer. *The Economic Times*. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/archive.cms>
- Malviya, S. and Bailay, R. (2019, Jan 15). Amazon food biz to log off if new rules remain on menu. *The Economic Times*. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/archive.cms>
- Mathur, K. (2013). *Public Policy and Politics in India: how institutions matter*. India: Oxford University Press.
- Mukherji, R. (2014). *Political Economy of Reforms in India*. India: Oxford University Press.
- The Economic Times(2016, Nov 21). *No Order against Ecomm Cos on FDI Rules Violation as HC Seeks ED Probe*. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/archive.cms>
- Rajappa, K. J. (2022). *Emergence of New Regulation in Foreign Direct Investment: Indian E-commerce*. (Master's thesis, Politecnico Di Torino, Turin, Italy).
- Shah, K. (2018). *Implications of Government Intervention in Foreign Direct Investment: The E-commerce Sector in India*. (Master's thesis, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand).
- Sharma, S. (2019, Feb 07). Flipkart's Binny Bansal says small startups will take maximum hit under FDI rules. *The Economic Times*. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/archive.cms>
- Sharma, S. (2015). Study on Impact of Reforms in E-commerce Business in India Through

Foreign Direct Investment. *Amity Management Review*, 4(2), 48-52

Suneja, K. (2019, Feb 04). E-commerce policy to have new FDI norms. *The Economic Times*.

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/archive.cms>

Vishnoi, A. (2018, Dec 05). Swadeshi Jagran Manch raises concern over Chinese ecommerce apps bypassing laws, duties. *The Economic Times*.

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/archive.cms>



Yalang and Palam: Cultural Heritage, Identity and Performance in the Limbu Community of Eastern Nepal

Dharmendra Tamang

English Lecturer

East-Pole College, Jorpati,

Kathmandu, Nepal.

Abstract

This article stresses the historical, social, and symbolic significance of the *Yalang* and *Palam* within the Limbu community in eastern Nepal. *Yalang* (paddy dance) and *Palam* (improvised oral song), rooted in communal threshing and agricultural practices, represent the Limbu people's collective memory, moral principles, and historical awareness. This study employs a descriptive approach, collecting information from newspapers and archival documents, and uses a historical-analytical research methodology. In the face of modernization and cultural change, the study shows how *Yalang* and *Palam* serve as living cultural institutions that combine labor art and ritual, promoting social cohesion and egalitarian participation while bolstering a Limbu identity. Through the transmission of historical information, philosophical contemplation, and shared values across generations, these performances serve as a means of cultural preservation. As essential components of both Limbu heritage and Nepal's broader cultural legacy, the study emphasizes the critical need to promote and conserve *Yalang* and *Palam* documentation.



Received: 16.04.2026

Accepted: 02.06.2026

Published: 15.06.2026

CJHSSC, Volume: 2

Issue: 1, June 2026

Page: 158 - 168

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20720639>

Corresponding Author:

dharmendratamang91@gmail.com

Copyright: Author © 2026



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Published by: Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College,
Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

Available at: www.ssjalangirlscollege.org.in/journal.php

Email: confluence.ssjgc@gmail.com

Keywords: Limbu community, *Yalang* and *Palam*, oral tradition, performance, cultural identity.

Introduction

One of Nepal's largest indigenous groups of Mongoloid descent, the Limbu community is known for their unique language, customs, and historical awareness. According to etymological interpretations, the term "Limbu" is closely associated with both territorial identity and warfare. The word is derived from two morphemes - *li*, which means 'bow', and *pu*, which means 'bird', according to scholars, suggesting the community's historical reputation as expert archers (Chemjong, 1961). According to the Nepal Population Census Report (2011), the total Limbu population is 387,300, which is 1.46% of the country's total population. The term *Limpu*, which eventually became Limbu, is thought to have originated among the Limbus. Chemjong (1961) claims that the Limbu's ancestral land, Limbuwan, was named after their conquest and defense of the area using bows and arrows. The self-designation *Yakthumba*, derived from the words yak (fort) and thumba (brave), is another way this martial identity is expressed. It designates people who have shown extraordinary bravery in capturing forts. According to Subba (1995), some scholars link *Yakthumba* to Yaksa, while others view it as the heroes of the hills. This interpretation solidifies the Limbu's sense of pride, bravery, and historical autonomy while also strongly aligning them with the larger Kirat identity. With Tibet to the north and the Terai plains to the south, Limbuwan, which historically stretched from the Arun River in the west to the Mechi River in the east, is home to the Limbus, who are native to eastern Nepal (*Brihat Nepali Shabdakosh*, 2005). According to historical accounts, Limbuwan's southern borders once included what are now nine districts in eastern Nepal and extended into portions of modern-day India (Shrestha, 2002). The Shah rulers conferred the administrative title of Subba on Limbu chiefs after the Gorkha state annexed Limbuwan in the late eighteenth century. This title subsequently spread throughout the community as a surname (Bista, 1967). The Limbus maintained their unique ethnic and cultural identity for a while despite being incorporated into the Nepali state because they were granted special land rights and local authority (Subba, 1995). Even though a sizable Limbu population still lives in eastern Nepal today, many have moved to places like Sikkim, Darjeeling, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Southeast Asia. Despite this, they still have strong cultural ties to Limbuwan, their ancestral home.

Historical Analogy of *Yalang* and *Palam*

The Limbu community's most well-known and interconnected cultural dance and song traditions are *Yalang* and *Palam*, which have a long history rooted in rural life. *Yalang*'s etymology derives from the Limbu terms ya (paddy) and lang (dance or harvest movement), indicating that rice

cultivation and harvesting were its primary sources (Chemjong, 1961). Scholars stress that *Yalang* lacks meaning and cultural completeness without *Palam*, an improvised oral song tradition performed during the dance (Nalbo, 1988). *Palam* is recognized as a unique form of poetic speech used by the Limbu people, serving as a means of social discourse and musical expression. The emergence of *Yalang* and *Palam* is consistently placed within the agricultural era, particularly in relation to the early cultivation of paddy, as indicated by historical and ethnographic research. Scholars contend that *Yalang* and *Palam* most likely originated during this early agrarian period, possibly more than six thousand years ago, coinciding with the Limbu people's pre-seventh-century migration into present-day Nepal, since rice farming is known to have started more than 7000 years ago in East and Southeast Asia (Nalbo, 1988; Chemjong, 1961). *Yalang's* origin is commonly attributed to pre-mechanized agricultural societies and collective threshing practices. Villagers, particularly young men and women, gathered to thresh dried paddy by trampling it with their feet in the absence of oxen or tools. They frequently worked nonstop day and night (Subba, 1995). They gradually transformed rhythmic trampling into coordinated movement and song as they sang throughout the process to get over physical tiredness and monotony. This labor-intensive practice developed into a structured dance, with *Palam* singing over time, ultimately evolving into the current *Yalang*, also known as the paddy dance (Subba, 1995; Chemjong, 1961).

This agricultural origin is further supported by folklore, which tells stories of how birds brought paddy seeds to humans and how communal threshing customs developed to preserve and process the harvest, symbolically connecting nature, labor, and culture (Sherma, 1988). Scholars generally concur that *Yalang* and *Palam* originated in an agricultural society and represent the Limbu people's close ties to land, labor, and communal cooperation, despite differences in narrative detail. *Yalang* and *Palam* are essential socio-cultural customs carried out at festivals, weddings, fairs, market events, and guest receptions in modern times. The dance is typically performed at night in linear or circular formations, with participants holding hands and following Ke-Ungba, the lead performer who directs movement and rhythm (Yehang, 1988). Together, men and women take part in *Palam* singing, a poetic duet that is both competitive and harmonious. The songs range from slow, melodic forms in Kemba Lang to faster, rhythm-driven performances in Kushrakpa, depending on context, tempo, and emotional tone (Subba, 1995). *Yalang's* stepping patterns symbolize gathering, threshing, and piling rice grains, turning agricultural labor into embodied cultural memory. Participation is governed by strict ritual rules: dancers must be from different clans, and any physical error necessitates a formal apology ritual

before returning to the group. These rules reinforce social respect and moral discipline (Gautam & Magar, 1994). *Palam* is a highly developed oral literary form that is used for cultural transmission, social negotiation, and emotional expression. Etymologically associated with the concept of speaking or the way of speech, *Palam* is a constantly evolving poetic dialogue rather than a static text (Ijam, 1988; Subba, 1995). It usually consists of an introductory (*Khyali*) thematic section and a concluding section. Before dancing, *Khyali* acts as a preliminary ritual dialogue to verify non-kinship and mutual consent (Subba, 1999). *Palam's* thematic content primarily examines love, longing, courtship, separation, frustration, and philosophical reflections on life. These ideas are frequently conveyed through metaphor, floral imagery, and allusions to the Mundum and Limbu belief systems (Subba, 1995). Regardless of age or marital status, Limbu women are remarkably free to participate in *Yalang* and *Palam*, which reflects a relatively egalitarian gender structure within Limbu society. Through these customs, the Limbu community's historical consciousness and social values are maintained across generations by *Yalang* and *Palam*, which continue to operate as living cultural institutions that integrate labor, art, emotion, ritual, and identity.

Research Methodology

Depending on the need of this study, researchers can collect information in either qualitative or quantitative ways (Sherma, 2023). This article uses a historical-analytical research methodology to investigate the Limbu community's cultural performance, with particular emphasis on the *Yalang* and *Palam* dance and song traditions. To place these practices within the larger historical context of Limbuwan and the agrarian and martial heritage of the Limbu people, historical analysis was employed to trace their origins, evolution, and socio-cultural significance (Chemjong, 1961; Subba, 1995; Shrestha, 2002). Secondary sources included historical texts, ethnographies, folklore, newspaper compilations, and archival documents (Lawati, 2014; Wonem, 2014; Sherma, 1988; Sambehamphe, 2010). While ethnographic observations of live performances, recorded dance formations, participant interaction, musical accompaniment, and adherence to customs, and interviews examined the origins, rituals, performance, structure, song content, costume, and rules of participation (Subba, 1995; Sambehamphe, 2010). To reconstruct the agrarian origins of *Yalang*, the evolution of *Palam* as a poetic oral tradition, and how these practices communicate collective identity, moral discipline, and historical memory, historical texts and folklore were examined (Chemjong, 1961; Nalbo, 1988; Sherma, 1988). Qualitative thematic analysis and historical contextualization were used to analyze the description and identify recurrent themes, symbolic gestures, and social values. To ensure triangulation, information from oral histories,

archival sources, and field observations was cross-verified (Finnegan, 2012; Rakesh, 1990; Subba, 1995). During documentation, ethical considerations included getting informed consent, protecting confidentiality, and honoring regional customs and religious beliefs (Schechner, 2002; Subba, 1995). A thorough understanding of *Yalang* and *Palam* as living cultural heritage was made possible by this integrated methodology, which reflected the Limbu people's collective identity, historical consciousness, and adaptive performance practices in the face of modernization and cultural change (Wonem, 2014; Subba, 2003).

Sublime State in Performing *Yalang* and *Palam*

In Limbu culture, the performance of *Yalang* and *Palam* creates a transitional social space in which divisions of caste, class, gender, and economic status are temporarily suspended. These performances promote social cohesion and collective identity by uniting participants within a common ritual framework, converting social differences into communal harmony. This is consistent with performance theory, which highlights ritual as a place where meaning is created through embodied action rather than rigid social roles (Schechner, 2002). Scholars contend that Limbu culture is fundamentally performative and based on group participation because the Limbus, an indigenous community in eastern Nepal, maintain their cultural identity through such performative rituals (Subba, 2004; McKenzie, 2001). Due to the importance of rice in Limbu culture, *Yalang*, also called *Dhannach*, is traditionally performed during the paddy planting and harvesting seasons. Today, it is also performed at fairs and social events (Chemjong, 1967). The dance emphasizes discipline, respect, and moral order. It is governed by stringent ritual rules, such as those that forbid close relatives from dancing together, limit physical contact, and require an apology for transgressions. Regardless of age or social standing, the ritual, performed in circular formations without musical instruments and accompanied by *Palam* songs, draws participants into an inclusive communal experience (Subba, 1995). *Palam* reinforces the Limbu worldview and maintains cultural continuity through embodied and oral traditions, going beyond romantic expression to address philosophical thoughts on life, separation, and nature (Subba, 2001).

***Yalang* and *Palam* as a Cultural Heritage and Conservation in a Changing Context**

The Limbu community's cultural customs, such as *yalang* and *palam*, are significant manifestations of its culture. When members of a social group coexist and share similar languages, worldviews, norms, ethics, customs, and lifestyles, a communal culture emerges. In this way, *Yalang* and *Palam* are intimately linked to Limbus communal life and have gradually

gained recognition as part of the community's cultural legacy. In the past, communal societies have frequently emerged as responses or alternatives to prevailing social structures, occasionally opposing national or mainstream cultures. *Yalang* and *Palam* have persisted in upholding the core cultural identity of the Limbu people despite these pressures. *Yalang* and *Palam* stand out among the many rituals and cultural practices of the Limbus as distinctive customs that eloquently capture their communal way of life and shared social values. *Palam* refers to the songs performed during *Yalang*, whereas *Dhannach* is a well-known traditional Limbu cultural dance. This unique blend of song and dance serves as an essential tool for maintaining Limbu cultural identity. Because they reflect a country's identity and help it be recognized internationally, culture, customs, religious sites, wildlife reserves, important locations, mountains, and dances are often considered part of a country's national heritage.

In this sense, *Yalang* and *Palam* are part of Nepal's broader cultural legacy, alongside their Limbu heritage. The traditional costumes worn during *Yalang* performances amply demonstrate the distinctiveness of Limbu identity, and many tourists who travel to the country's eastern regions express interest in witnessing traditional cultural dances. In his article, *Purwanchalko Chabrung Ra Dhannach*, published in The Annapurna Post, Surya Sambehamphe highlights the cultural significance of *Yalang*, noting that while many traditional Limbu cultural practices are vanishing, *Yalang* is still practiced. According to him, *Yalang* is one of the Limbu community's essential and enduring folk dance traditions (Sambehamphe, 2010). The Limbus have a rich cultural heritage, and this unique collection of folklore is essential to defining their identity within Nepal's ethnically and racially diverse population. As a folk dance that differs from other dance styles, *yalang* is a vibrant and dynamic way for the Limbu people to express their culture. *Yalang* serves the same purpose for the Limbus as rituals like *Rateuli* do for the Chhetri and other castes: it represents their cultural identity.

Many Limbus believe that mastering *Hakpare Samlo* and other aesthetic elements, regularly participating in *Yalang*, and becoming proficient in *Palam* are effective ways to preserve their ancestral culture. Different tribes and castes around the world uphold unique cultural and ritual practices that form the foundation of their individual identities. Thus, culture and ritual serve as potent indicators of group identity and ultimately contribute to a country's cultural legacy. John. According to R. Subba *Yalang* and *Palam* are mainly performed by the Limbu community on happy and festive occasions. These shows promote family get-togethers and offer chances to express happiness and sadness. *Yalang* and *Palam* can be performed in public areas, such as marketplaces and local neighborhoods, during ceremonies like weddings and celebrations

(Subba, 1995). The Limbus, like other castes and tribes, use these customs to express their religious, cultural, and linguistic identities.

Dhannach is a particularly important kind of communal celebration. For the Limbus, the paddy dance has become a significant historical symbol and a source of pride, helping them remember and maintain their former splendor. Honoring and celebrating this past is a kind of cultural preservation in and of itself. The Limbus have a rich cultural heritage, as attested by their long-standing customs, unique lifestyles, belief systems, mythology, folklore, and extensive oral literature. The Limbu people's spiritual ideas, philosophical justifications, customs, and life experiences are all embodied in Mundum, the sacred oral tradition. Language, culture, and religion are important factors that set one caste or ethnic group apart from another, giving each a distinct identity and recognition. Among the most important cultural practices the Limbus have used to preserve their identity and prevent the extinction of their heritage are *yalang* and *palam*. Limbu customs and culture have changed significantly over time.

A thorough documentation and compilation of the Limbu community's extensive collection of folktales, legends, myths, fables, lyrics, and folklore would amount to multiple volumes. Surprisingly, a large portion of this rich literature is still spoken. There are signs that the Limbus had a writing system at one point, but it was eventually abandoned. Even Buddhist texts like the *Lalitavistara* mention the writings of Yakshas and Asuras, which may be references to the Kiratas, according to Chaitanya Subba, who points out that Mundum contains references indicating the existence of ancient scripts among the Kiratas (Subba, 2003). However, for unknown reasons, this writing tradition eventually vanished. With the invention of the *Sirijanga* script, historical evidence indicates that a written tradition later resurfaced. While Mundum remained mostly unrecorded, only a small number of works are credited to *Sirijanga*, and even these illuminate only specific facets of Limbu culture. However, these writings show that the Limbu had already established religious customs and standardized written language. The natural development of Limbu culture and religion was probably interfered with by this encounter with the so-called great tradition. In the Hindu hierarchical system, Sanskritization—the process by which lower castes or tribal groups adopt the traditions and ideals of higher castes—became a popular strategy for social mobility. As a result, many Limbus gave up some of their traditional customs and progressively adopted Hindu practices. A vital component of cultural heritage is language, which serves as the main medium for expressing ideas, feelings, beliefs, and thoughts. The Limbu language is still spoken at festivals and family get-togethers, but its use has declined due to the effects of mixed communities and growing preference for Nepali.

According to Govinda Angbung (personal interview), the Limbu language is in grave danger due to the predominance of Nepali. Kirat Yakthung Chumlung is one of the organizations that has worked to preserve the Limbu language and culture. Subba (1995) notes that hundreds of thousands of people in Nepal, India, Bhutan, and the world's diaspora speak the Limbu language, which was officially recognized in Sikkim in 1981 (Subba, 1995). However, the ruling class in Nepal long suppressed the Limbu language and literature, impeding social, cultural, and economic advancement (Subba, 1995). Despite these obstacles, organizations such as Kirat Yakthung Chumlung and Kirat Dharma Tatha Sahitya Utthan Sangh have made important contributions by promoting documentation, language instruction, and cultural revitalization (Subba, 2003). Limbu cultural practices have been further altered by external factors such as Christianity, Western culture, the media, and contemporary education, as well as internal shifts. According to interviews with community leaders like Govinda Wonem and Dil Bahadur Lawati, *Yalang*, *Palam* costumes, performances, ethics, and linguistic purity have undergone substantial changes.

Forceful behavior, mixed languages, movie songs, and contemporary clothing have gradually supplanted traditional norms of consent, polite interaction, and linguistic integrity. Cultural deterioration has been accelerated by these shifts, migration, military recruitment, and media exposure. Despite these difficulties, *Yalang* is still a living, breathing tradition rather than a static artifact. As an oral performance, tradition transmits historical information, emotional expression, and philosophical contemplation while adapting to shifting circumstances. *Palam* songs provide both aesthetic pleasure and cultural significance as genuine representations of love, sorrow, loss, joy, and human experience (Rakesh, 1990; Finnegan, 2012). Oral tradition continues to be one of the most personal and genuine sources of historical information, according to Kizerbo (1981).

To sum up, *Yalang* and *Palam*, which stand for collective identity, historical memory, and artistic expression, are essential elements of Limbu cultural heritage. However, their survival is seriously threatened by modernization, acculturation, state neglect, and media dominance. According to Diwas and Bandhu (2005), mainstream culture is increasingly influencing and eclipsing traditional folk songs. To ensure this rich legacy endures for future generations, the community, government, cultural institutions, and international organizations must work together urgently to preserve and promote *Yalang* and *Palam*.

Conclusion

This study on *Yalang* and *Palam*, the cultural performance of *Limbus*, has explored the performative activities of *Limbus* before, after, and during the festive occasion. Not only this, but their cultural activities, from time immemorial to now, are clearly stated through reflections on the expert writing on the dancing and singing culture of the *Limbus*. Furthermore, it has highlighted cultural identity and the challenge of conserving it in a changing context.

Yalang and *Palam* are performed in various ways due to the fluid, multilevel nature of oral tradition. It is also a collective memory of the past and has no individual authorship; therefore, it is a living culture. The *Yalang* and *Palam* significantly help define the Limbu people's distinctive identity, showing how they are and how they interact with others and with each other within their community. It connects haves and have-nots, high and low, black and white, strong and weak, by bringing all the Limbus together through the thread of culture in a Liminalnorm.

Yalang and *Palam* are performed in an open place at night. Often, this helps them forget their pain, suffering, and sorrows, and ties them in a garland of multiple colours like a rainbow. This cultural performance, also known as Dhannach, is carried out during the planting and harvesting seasons of Dhan (paddy), a staple food of the *Limbus*. This is really associated with the myth of entertainment and the source of inspiration for *Limbus*. Most of the *Limbus* believe that frequent participation in *Yalang* and becoming well-versed in *Palam* facilitate their gaining mastery over their woes and troubles. “The *Palam* song functions as a means of transferring traditional ideas and culture. It fosters courteous manners among the singers, and thus, they can live happier lives. Courteous behaviour facilitates the process of socialization” (Tumbahang, 2023, p. 121)

Thus, *Yalang* and *Palam* vividly represent *Limbu* culture and society and are therefore part of Limbu culture's heritage. It is an amalgam of oral traditions and creativity, a performing art, a living culture, a great source of cultural freedom, and so on. Nevertheless, now, *Yalang*, as well as *Palam* and other such historically and culturally valuable heritages, are gradually becoming extinct, mainly due to external and internal ignorance. Thus, it is a crucial time that urgently requires the implementation of special measures to conserve and promote such heritages. Therefore, all of us, not only *Limbus*, should take strong measures to conserve the long-lived, unique culture and hand it down to the upcoming generation to retain their history and culture, their identity from every side. The core ideas must be understood in time to resolve them, rather than simply stating that, once upon a time, the Limbus in the eastern hills of Nepal lived with unique cultures.

References

- Bista, D. B. (1967). *People of Nepal*. Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar.
- Central Bureau of Statistics. (2014). National Population Census Report (2011). *Government of Nepal*.
- Carlson, M. (2008). "What in performance ?" Bial, Henry. Eds. *The Performance Studies Reader*. New York, pp. 70-75.
- Chemjong, I. (1967). *History and Culture of Kirat People*. Lalitpur: Kirat yakthung Chumlung.
- Clifford, G. (2017). *Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books.
- Diamond, E. (1996). *Performance and Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge.
- Durrant, W. (1935). *The Near East. Our Oriental Heritage*. New York: MJF Books.
- Gautam, R., & Magar, A. K. (1989). *Tribal Ethnography of Nepal*. Azadur: Book Faith India.
- Ingam, S. B. (2063 BS). *Kirat Eitibas Ra Sanskriti*. Kathmandu: Prompt Printers Pvt.Ltd.
- Kainla, B. (n. d.). *Sanglang Pegiro, Tongsing Takma Mudhum*. Unpublished.
- Lawati, D. B. (2014). *Personal Interview*.
- Lawati, Y. (2005). *Aadibasi Limbu Jatiko Samchhipta Parichaya*. Kathmandu: DillBahadur Lawati.
- Nalbo, S. (2056 BS). *Palam Ingjum*. Damak: *Limbu Sahitya Pratisthan*.
- Pande, M. (2063 BS). *Nepalka Janjatibaru*. Kathmandu: Pairavi Prakashan.
- Sambahamphe, S. (2063 BS). *Purwanchal Ko Chabrunge Ra Dhannach*. *Anapurna Post*.
- Schechner, R. (1988). "From Ritual to Theatre, and Back". *Performance Theory*. New York: Routledge, pp. 112-170.
- Sherma, C. K. (2056 BS). *Yalakma Mundhum*. Damak: Bhupendra Thebe and Urmila Thebe.
- Sherma, C. K., et al (2010). *Personal Interview*.
- Sherma, A. B. (2023). Process of Perfection Method and Its Adaptability in EFL Classrooms of Nepal. *Journal of English Teaching*, 9(3), 335-349. <https://doi.org/10.33541/jet.v9i3.5178>

- Shrestha, S. K. (2042 BS). *Limbuwan Ko Aitihask Adhyan (Historical Study of Limbuwan)*. Lalitpur: Kirat Prakashan.
- Subba, C. (1995). *The Culture and Religion of Limbus*. Kathmandu: K.B. Subba.
- Subba, J. R. (1999). *The Limbus of Eastern Himalayas*. Ref. Sikkim, Gangtok: Sikkim Yakthung Mundhum Saplopa.
- Subba, S. (2062 BS). *Sanskritik Paribesima Yalang-Dhannachko Sthan* (Place of Paddy Dance in the Cultural Aspect). (Term Paper) Kathmandu: Nepal Academy.
- Subedi, A. (2000). Power of Oral Poetry: *Limbu* Ritual Songs. *Across*, 4(1), 23-27.
- Tumbahang, M. K. (2023). The Limbu Song Palam: A Powerful Means of Inculcating Pragmatic Values. *Dristikon: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 13(1), 111–122.
<https://doi.org/10.3126/dristikon.v13i1.56060>
- Turner, V. (1988). *The Anthropology of Performance*. New York: Paj.
- Wonem, G. (2014). *Personal Interview*.



Right to Information Act and its Implementation in Health Sciences: A Thematic Review

Kuheli Dutta

Assistant Librarian

Presidency University, Kolkata

& Research Scholar, DLIS

Netaji Subhas Open University, Kolkata

West Bengal, India.

Abstract

The Right to Information Act was enacted in India in 2005 to reduce corruption and promote transparency across various public sectors. Public Health Institutes also come under the purview of this Act. This article is a review of the implementation of the RTI Act in Health Sciences to explore how it enables information access, bringing transparency and accountability. The review was based on the literature available on the PubMed database. "Right to Information Act" [Title/Abstract] OR "RTI Act" [Title/Abstract] OR "Right to Information" [Title/Abstract] – search query was used to find the literature. All 227 resources retrieved using the search syntax mentioned were screened. Of those, only 21 were included in the study because they contained the term "Right to Information Act" in the title and/or abstract, as they were the most relevant. A thematic review was conducted to identify the major areas of concern in Health Sciences. The themes are: RTI Act as an unconventional legal tool for accessing information in Health Sciences; RTI Act vs. Patient Privacy and Rights; RTI Act and Health-related Policy Framework; RTI Act in disclosing Health Service Infrastructure, Occupational hazards, and Data Discrepancy.



Received: 30.04.2026

Accepted: 08.06.2026

Published: 15.06.2026

CJHSSC, Volume: 2

Issue: 1, June 2026

Page: 169 - 176

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20722080>

Corresponding Author: dutta.kuheli83@gmail.com

Copyright: Author © 2026



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Published by: Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College,
Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

Available at: www.ssjalangirlscollege.org.in/journal.php

Email: confluence.ssjgc@gmail.com

Keywords: RTI Act, Health Sciences, Anti- Tobacco Policy, Occupational diseases, Health Policy.

Introduction

The Right to Information Act, 2005, is an important act that enables people of India to access information available under the control of any public authority of the Government of India. Twenty years have passed since the enactment of the RTI Act, 2005. The Act was enacted to bring transparency to the public system. This article examines how the RTI Act has been utilized and the effects it has had on health and medical sciences since its enactment.

Objectives:

- i) To explore the major themes and areas of implementation of the RTI Act in health sciences through a thematic review.
- ii) To find out how the RTI Act is leaving an impact on the Health Sciences
- iii) To find the gaps in experiments or research areas

Methodology:

This study examined the literature available in the PubMed database using the search query: ("Right to Information Act" [Title/Abstract] OR "RTI Act" [Title/Abstract] OR "Right to Information" [Title/Abstract]). All 227 resources retrieved using the search syntax mentioned were screened, and of those, only 21 were included in the study, having the term "Right to Information Act" in the title and/or abstract. The database has no resources indexed with the phrase "RTI ACT". All these 21 selected articles are in the English language. After going through all 21 articles, a thematic review was conducted.

Stage	Records	Decision
Identification: Using the search query." ("Right to Information Act"[Title/Abstract] OR "RTI Act"[Title/Abstract] OR "Right to Information"[Title/Abstract])	227	Identified
Screening	227	Screened
Relevant to the study found	21 (16 full texts and 5 abstracts)	Included for review. All are in the English Language. All have the term "Right to Information Act" in the title and/or abstract.

Identified Themes

The following key themes were identified during the study: (i) RTI Act as a legal unconventional tool to access information in Health Sciences, (ii) RTI Act vs Patient Privacy and Rights, (iii) RTI Act and Health-related Policy Framework, (iv) RTI Act in disclosing Health Service Infrastructure, Occupational hazards, and Data Discrepancy.

(i) RTI Act as a legal unconventional tool to access information in Health Sciences

The study shows that, of the 21 studies covered, most used the RTI ACT, 2005, to obtain information from relevant institutes to collect data on multivariate areas. The review revealed many areas where data cannot be obtained through normal channels; RTI was the proven alternative for accessing such information. Data on asbestos-exposed cancers, the national cancer registry, occupational diseases and safety guidelines, the implementation of anti-smoking and anti-tobacco laws, and the national health policy were obtained through RTI applications. Other areas covered were air pollution control initiatives in hospitals, airports, and auditoriums to control air-borne disease, especially during COVID times. Awareness of medical professionals regarding patients' rights was also found in the reviewed literature.

(ii) RTI Act vs Patient Privacy and Rights

The review shows that, in psychiatry, ethical considerations must be balanced with data transparency and justified. Some acts like the UK's 'Data Protection Act 1998' and 'Access to Health Records Act 1990', California's 'Confidentiality of Medical Information Act', protect patient rights of confidentiality and say the decision to disclose sensitive and private information should be made in the best interest of the patient. Jain, S., et al (2017). Iranian legislation safeguards maximum disclosure while exempting sensitive and private information (Talimi, M. et al., 2016). In European countries, a law known as the 'Right to be forgotten' allows patients to request the deletion of their data after discharge to prevent unauthorized access to and misuse of sensitive personal data (Mohapatra S., 2016). Requests are received from patients, employers, relatives, or family associates for access to records under the RTI Act. Only after obtaining clear patient permission may pertinent information be revealed, and the validation of such action should be documented. In a few extraordinary cases, like life-threatening emergencies, e.g., preventing a patient from committing suicide, or if there is a possibility of harm to others, confidentiality may be breached (Math et al., 2015). (Mohapatra S., 2016) expressed that psychiatric institutions should implement careful tactics in revealing patients' personal and

sensitive information under the RTI Act to stop its misuse. Mishra, N. N. et al. (2008) concluded that disclosure of information under the RTI Act should be justified while safeguarding patient privacy.

(iii) RTI Act and Health-related Policy Framework

The government's imposition of tobacco control measures on international cigarette companies led to the execution of regulations on local tobacco products. Lobbying among the government and the tobacco-producing companies is also a hindrance to implementing tobacco control laws (Sankaran, S. et al., 2015). Using the Right to Information Act of 2005, an attempt was made to explore how much higher educational institutes are complying with the guidelines as mentioned in India's 'anti-tobacco and anti-smoking law' by putting up signboards, excluding the sale of cigarettes and tobacco products within 100 yards of the institution, eliminating smoking within the campus, collecting fines from the offenders and the vendors. (Singh R., 2023). Analysis of media reports and tobacco industry documents revealed that connections between government representatives and tobacco companies led to negative consequences for tobacco control (Rao, N. V., et al., 2016). McBroom K. (2016) argues that the insufficient implementation of government TB schemes undermines legitimate rights to life expectancy, well-being, nutrition, and equality. While considering patient rights awareness and related legal issues, it was found that nurses had limited knowledge of their roles (Kumar, H. et al., 2013).

(iv) RTI Act in disclosing Health Service Infrastructure, Occupational hazards, and Data Discrepancy

Another work by Singh, R., & Frank, A. L. (2023) examined the efficiency of air quality management systems. It revealed that an inclusive, stakeholder-based approach was used to frame the CAQM air pollution policy. Experts and the public may both take part in policy formation initiatives. A study by Singh R. (2022a) showed that dilution ventilation, by improving fresh air intake to reduce the spread of air-borne infections, was an important strategy to maintain in mass gathering spaces like halls and auditoriums, where there is also the possibility of transmission of air-borne diseases. However, most auditoriums at engineering institutes under survey failed to meet proper air quality standards. Another study by the same author suggested manual opening of windows and doors at regular intervals as another option to allow fresh air, as air conditioning systems in 58 Indian airports under survey did not meet good air quality standards (Singh R. 2022b). Again, the author Singh R. (2022c) conducted an experiment to gain

insight into the mechanisms of air-borne disease control in hospital waiting areas, which often exhibit poor air quality or lack proper maintenance. Singh, R., & Frank, A. L. (2025) sought to assess the occupational health risks faced by migrant workers and their exposure to occupational diseases. They opined that there should be a robust mechanism to assess occupational diseases, a disease registry, and measures to address the situation; policy guidelines are also important. A study showed that there is a gap between the figures on mesothelioma cases in India, where asbestos exposure causes cancer, as reported by the National Cancer Registry, and the actual number of cases, as sought under the RTI Act. It reveals weaknesses in the data-maintenance infrastructure of public-sector institutions (Singh, R., & Frank, A. L., 2024). One study by Goldsworthy, T., & McGillivray, L. (2017) examined criminal activity by OMCGs from the 'Queensland Police Service' (QPS), and data were obtained under the legislative framework of the 'Queensland Right to Information Act (RTI) 2009'. Data revealed that the role of OMCGs in the drug market has been exaggerated. One study by Jacob, A., Weiss, H., & Mathew, A. (2016) shows that a general strike negatively impacts the healthcare delivery in a society. The number of patients in hospital emergency departments is lower than usual due to a strike, and the situation remains disturbed. A survey conducted by Singh, P. V. et al. (2013) using the RTI Act 2005 as a tool revealed that autonomous institutes were more competent in relation to procurement procedures and the management of medical drug expenses. A study revealed serious lacunae in government databases, including misleading data, compared with the actual data received under the RTI Act. Under the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) in 2005, the aim was to prevent and manage anemia during pregnancy and to ensure access to quality emergency obstetric care to reduce maternal mortality. The study found a scarcity of iron supplements and the absence of proper emergency obstetric care services (Chaturvedi, S., & Ranadive, B., 2007). The RTI Act was utilized to obtain data that revealed a number mismatch between government-reported data and the RTI data obtained (Srinivas, V., & Puliyel, J. M., 2007) while estimating the true occurrence of polio.

Conclusion

The thematic review explores how the RTI Act has served as both a legal and an unconventional tool for obtaining research data in the Health Sciences. It helped uncover gaps in health service infrastructure and policy implementation and exposed occupational hazards, enabling proper policies to be put in place. In the fields of psychiatry and Mental health, there is still an ethical dilemma between information dissemination through the RTI Act and patients' right to privacy

to prevent social harm or stigma. Proper patient consent and justification for the disclosure must be maintained. It is worth noting that, in this case, health data should not always be treated as RTI-related data, which can be disclosed without the patient's consent, unless it is absolutely necessary. The review found poor data management, restricted access to data through normal channels, inadequate infrastructure, and a bureaucratic nature, which remain hindrances to proper health-related policy implementation. This, in turn, causes a disconnection between the policy promise and service delivery in practice. Weak surveillance mechanisms also hinder the implementation of policies. A dependence on RTI data may arise due to the absence of reliable data through normal channels. As research in Health Sciences is mostly data-driven, the use of RTI is evident, despite the risks of denial and incomplete data.

Limitations and Further Scope:

The study was limited to 21 articles retrieved from PubMed using the search criteria described in the methodology. More inclusion of articles and expansion of databases would fetch more relevant areas of the study.

References:

- Chaturvedi, S., & Ranadive, B. (2007). Are we really making motherhood safe? A study of provision of iron supplements and emergency obstetric care in rural Maharashtra. *The National Medical Journal of India*, 20(6), 294–296.
- Goldsworthy, T., & McGillivray, L. (2017). An examination of outlaw motorcycle gangs and their involvement in the illicit drug market and the effectiveness of anti-association legislative responses. *The International journal on drug policy*, 41, 110–117.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2016.12.009>
- Jacob, A., Weiss, H., & Mathew, A. (2016). The Impact of General Strike on Government Healthcare Delivery in Kerala State in India. *Journal of environmental and public health*, 2016, 8096082. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2016/8096082>
- Jain, S., Jain, H., Srivastava, A. S., & Yadav, J. S. (2017). Indian legislation “Right To Information Act”: An ethical dilemma for medical professionals. *Asian journal of psychiatry*, 25, 161–162. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2016.10.029>

- Kumar, H., Gokhale, Jain, K., & Mathur, D. R. (2013). Legal awareness and responsibilities of nursing staff in administration of patient care in a trust hospital. *Journal of clinical and diagnostic research: JCDR*, 7(12), 2814–2817.
<https://doi.org/10.7860/JCDR/2013/7737.3886>
- Math, S., Viswanath, B., Maroky, A. (2015). Ethical Issues in Psychiatry in Southeast Asia: Research and Practice. In: Trivedi, J., Tripathi, A. (eds) *Mental Health in South Asia: Ethics, Resources, Programs and Legislation*. International Library of Ethics, Law, and the New Medicine, vol 58. Springer, Dordrecht. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9017-8_2
- McBroom K. (2016). Litigation as TB Rights Advocacy: A New Delhi Case Study. *Health and human rights*, 18(1), 69–84.
- Mishra, N. N., Parker, L. S., Nimgaonkar, V. L., & Deshpande, S. N. (2008). Privacy and the Right to Information Act, 2005. *Indian journal of medical ethics*, 5(4), 158–161.
<https://doi.org/10.20529/IJME.2008.057>
- Mohapatra S. (2016). Right to information act, 2005 and privacy in public mental health sector in India. *Asian journal of psychiatry*, 19, 23. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2015.11.011>
- Rao, N. V., Bhojani, U., Shekar, P., & Daddi, S. (2016). Conflicts of interest in tobacco control in India: an exploratory study. *Tobacco control*, 25(6), 715–718.
<https://doi.org/10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2015-052503>
- Sankaran, S., Hiilamo, H., & Glantz, S. A. (2015). Implementation of graphic health warning labels on tobacco products in India: the interplay between the cigarette and the bidi industries. *Tobacco control*, 24(6), 547–555. <https://doi.org/10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2013-051536>
- Singh R. (2022a). Public Health Issue of Indoor Dilution Ventilation for Disease Prevention Versus PM2.5 in Intake Air in Auditoriums of Premier Engineering Institutes in India. *Cureus*, 14(5), e25258. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.25258>
- Singh R. (2022b). Studying the Double Paradox in Air Conditioning at Indian Airports for Air-borne Infection Prevention and Filtration of Harmful Suspended Particulate Matter. *Cureus*, 14(4), e23748. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.23748>

- Singh R. (2022c). The Risk Status of Waiting Areas for Air-borne Infection Control in Delhi Hospitals. *Cureus*, 14(3), e23211. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.23211>
- Singh R. (2023). Compliance with Higher Education-Related Tobacco Control Law Provisions by Institutions of National Importance in India. *Cureus*, 15(7), e42129. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.42129>
- Singh R. (2023). Decentralisation of the Compliance of Anti-tobacco Law in India: The Case of Higher Educational Institutions in New Delhi, India. *Cureus*, 15(7), e41247. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.41247>
- Singh, P. V., Tatambhotla, A., Kalvakuntla, R., & Chokshi, M. (2013). Understanding public drug procurement in India: a comparative qualitative study of five Indian states. *BMJ open*, 3(2), e001987. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2012-001987>
- Singh, R., & Frank, A. (2023). The importance of public participation in framing air pollution policy: outcome of a judicial review in New Delhi, India. *Public health action*, 13(4), 169–172. <https://doi.org/10.5588/pha.23.0047>
- Singh, R., & Frank, A. L. (2024). Analysis of mesothelioma cases and National Cancer Registry data to assess asbestos exposure in India. *Public health action*, 14(1), 30–33. <https://doi.org/10.5588/pha.24.0003>
- Singh, R., & Frank, A. L. (2025). Work-Related Migration to the Alang Ship-Breaking Industry from Other Parts of India: An Overview of Health-Related Issues. *Annals of global health*, 91(1), 32. <https://doi.org/10.5334/aogh.4735>
- Srinivas, V., & Puliyl, J. M. (2007). Estimation of true incidence of polio: overcoming misclassification errors due to stool culture insensitivity. *Indian pediatrics*, 44(8), 596–597.
- Talimi, M., Shariati-Nasab, S., Zare, M. K., & Omani-Samani, R. (2016). The right to information and their exceptions in medical practices in the Iranian legal system. *Journal of medical ethics and history of medicine*, 9, 15.



दलित चेतना की अवधारणा (The Concept of Dalit Consciousness)

Dr. Suchita Kujur
Assistant Professor
Department of Hindi
Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College,
Kolkata , West Bengal, India

Abstract

This paper critically examines the concept of Dalit consciousness, which refers to the critical awareness and collective self-identity that developed among Dalit communities in response to centuries of caste-based oppression and social exclusion in India. Dalit consciousness is more than an understanding of historical marginalization; it is a political, cultural, and moral assertion of dignity, equality, and human worth. The concept was significantly shaped by reformers and leaders such as Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, and B.R. Ambedkar. They challenged the legitimacy of the caste hierarchy and rejected the notion of ritual pollution and inherited inferiority. Ambedkar, in particular, framed Dalit consciousness as a rejection of the Hindu social order that denied basic rights, advocating education, conversion, and constitutional safeguards as tools for emancipation. Dalit consciousness operates on two levels: it critically exposes the structural violence, economic deprivation, and cultural stigmatization embedded in the caste system, and next, it constructively promotes solidarity among Dalit groups, revives suppressed histories, and cultivates cultural pride through literature, art, and political mobilization. At its core, Dalit consciousness represents a shift from passive acceptance of status to active resistance and self-determination. It seeks not merely inclusion within the existing order, but the transformation of that order toward an egalitarian society based on liberty, fraternity, and social justice.



Received: 30.04.2026

Accepted: 11.06.2026

Published: 15.06.2026

CJHSSC, Volume: 2

Issue: 1, June 2026

Page: 177 - 187

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20722543>

Corresponding Author: suchita79kujur@gmail.com

Copyright: Author © 2026



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Published by: Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College,
Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

Available at: www.ssjalangirlscollege.org.in/journal.php
Email: confluence.ssjgc@gmail.com

Keywords: Dalit consciousness, collective self-identity, B.R. Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule.

दलित शब्द का अर्थ

बृहद हिन्दी कोश में 'दलित' शब्द इस रूप में है- "रौंदा, कुचला, दबाया हुआ, पदाक्रांत वर्ग, हिंदुओं में वे शूद्र जिन्हें अन्य जतियों के समान अधिकार प्राप्त नहीं है"।¹ हिन्दी संक्षिप्त शब्दसागर में 'दलित' शब्दका अर्थ इस तरह दिया गया है- "मसला हुआ, मर्दित, दबाया, रौंदा या कुचला हुआ, खंडित, विनष्ट किया हुआ"।² शोषित समाज चाहे वह किसी भी जाति, वर्ग और धर्म में आता हो।

दलित चेतना के पुरोधा डॉ. बी. आर. अंबेडकर के शब्दों में "शूद्र भारतीय आर्य-समाज का चौथा वर्ण है। शूद्रों को चतुर्वर्णिय व्यवस्था के परिणामस्वरूप अपरिमित क्षति उठानी पड़ी है तथा यही व्यवस्था उनके पतन-पराभव का मूलकारण है और शूद्र केवल शूद्र ही उसका उच्छेद करने में सक्षम हैं"।³ बाबा साहब अपने अनुभव के आधार पर इस निष्कर्ष पर पहुँच चुके थे कि समाज की ऊँची जतियों से दलितों के उद्धार की आशा करना व्यर्थ है जिन्हें प्रतिपल दलित होने की अवमानना का शिकार होना पड़ता है उन्हें ही समाज में स्वयं के लिए जगह बनाना होगा और इसके लिए उन्होंने तीन मंत्र बताए शिक्षित बनो, संघर्ष करो और संगठित रहो।

मोहनदास नैमिशराय 'दलित' शब्द को और अधिक विस्तार देते हुए कहते हैं कि "दलित शब्द मार्क्स प्रणीत सर्वहारा शब्द के लिए समानार्थी लगता है लेकिन इन दोनों शब्दों में पर्याप्त भेद भी है। दलित की व्याप्ति अधिक है तो सर्वहारा की सीमित। दलित के अंतर्गत सामाजिक, धार्मिक, आर्थिक, राजनीतिक शोषण का ही अंतर्भाव होता है, तो सर्वहारा केवल आर्थिक शोषण तक ही सीमित है। प्रत्येक दलित व्यक्ति सर्वहारा के अंतर्गत आ सकता है लेकिन प्रत्येक सर्वहारा को दलित कहने के लिए बाध्य नहीं हो सकते। अर्थात् सर्वहारा की सीमाओं में आर्थिक विषमता का शिकार वर्ग आता है, जबकि दलित विशेष तौर पर सामाजिक विषमता का शिकार होता है"।⁴ दलित का अर्थ सबसे पहले अछूतों से है बाद में वंचितों से है क्योंकि पिछड़े आदिवासियों को भी हम सर्वहारा ही कहेंगे। दुर्गम पहाड़ियों और जंगलों में वास करने के कारण ये सभ्यता की दृष्टि से पिछड़े कहे जा सकते हैं, उनकी अशिक्षा का फायदा ताकतवर उठा सकते हैं, आर्थिक रूप से वे विपन्न हो सकते हैं

लेकिन आदिवासी समाज में जाति और वर्णगत भेदभाव नहीं है फलतः अछूत होने की पीड़ा उन्हें नहीं झेलनी पड़ती है। शिक्षा प्राप्त कर, अपनी स्थिति सुधार कर वे आसानी से मुख्यधारा में शामिल हो सकते हैं लेकिन अछूत जितने भी ऊंचे ओहदे में पहुँच जाए जाति का कोढ़ उनका पीछा नहीं छोड़ता। मोहनदास नैमिशराय ने अपने अनुभव के आधार पर जो उपरोक्त बात कही वह पूर्णतः सच है।

युवा आलोचक रामचन्द्र के अनुसार “दलित शब्द सिर्फ किसी विशेष जाति-उपजाति से संबद्ध न होकर सामाजिक, आर्थिक और राजनीतिक अधिकारों की प्राप्ति हेतु फुले-अंबेडकरवादी एवं अन्य परिवर्तनकारी विचारधारात्मक वर्गों के संघर्ष का प्रतीक है। भारत की सामाजिक, धार्मिक और सांस्कृतिक व्यवस्था की संरचना में उपेक्षित, अपमानित, प्रताड़ित और अधिकारों से वंचित वर्ग का प्रतिनिधित्व करने वाला ‘दलित’ शब्द सामाजिक परिवर्तन की आकांक्षा का पर्याय बन चुका है। दलित शब्द प्रतिपक्ष के शोषण और व्यवहार का बोध करता है, उस हिन्दू व्यवस्था को कटघरे में खड़ा करता है जिसने उसे ऐसा बनाया है। यह शब्द याचना, निरीहता, रिरियाहट और सहानुभूति को नकारता है चेतनाशीलता का विकल्प बनता है”।⁵ निसंदेह फुले-अंबेडकर जैसे व्यक्तित्व के बिना दलित चेतना की कल्पना नहीं की जा सकती। दलित शब्द मजबूर करता है कि समाज उसकी तरफ देखे दूसरी तरफ उनकी हालत के जिम्मेदार वर्ग की घिनौनी करतूतों का भी पर्दाफाश करता है।

ओमप्रकाश वाल्मीकि कहते हैं कि ‘दलित’ शब्द जब साहित्य से जुड़ता है तब उसका अर्थ ही बदल जाता है-“साहित्य के साथ दलित शब्द के जुड़ते ही उसकी व्यापकता और अधिक क्रांतिबोधक हो जाती है। अर्थ और अधिक व्यंजनात्मक होकर साहित्य की भूमिका और सामाजिक उत्तरदायित्वों को और अधिक विश्लेषित करने की क्षमता हासिल कर लेता है दलित शब्द विरोध की अभिव्यक्ति का प्रतीक बन जाता है। मानवीय सरोकारों से जुड़ कर सामाजिक प्रतिबद्धता स्थापित करता है”।⁶

अर्थात् जब साहित्य के साथ दलित शब्द जुड़ जाता है तब उसका कार्यक्षेत्र विस्तृत हो जाता है। साहित्य से जुड़कर दलित शब्द दलित विमर्श की जमीन तैयार करता है।

दलित साहित्य ने दलितों को अपनी आपबीती कहने का अवसर प्रदान किया है दलित साहित्य दलित जीवन का ऐसा दस्तावेज़ है जो दलित जीवन की पीड़ाओं को, दलितों के संघर्षों को हमारे सामने लाती है तब दलित जीवन की समस्याएँ विमर्श के केंद्र में आती हैं और यहीं से यह बहस भी शुरू हो जाती है कि दलित साहित्य कौन लिख सकता है? क्या दलित साहित्य लिखने के लिए दलित होना जरूरी है या नहीं? इन बहसों के साथ दलित मसला गहराता जाता है।

दलित चेतना की अवधारणा

दलित चेतना का संबंध दलितों की जागरूकता से है। मनुष्य की चेतना परिस्थिति से निर्मित होती है “किसी भी समाज में विकास बिना प्रतिरोध के संभव नहीं है। स्थापित मूल्य, समर्थित व्यवस्था अपने को कायम रखने का हर संभव प्रयत्न करती है और नवचेतन सम्पन्न वर्ग इन स्थापित मूल्य व्यवस्था का प्रतिरोध करता है। प्रतिरोधी चेतना दूसरे जगत से अवतरित नहीं होती बल्कि हमेशा से ही स्थापित मूल्य व्यवस्था के भीतर ही प्रतिरोध करने वाला वर्ग विद्यमान रहता है”¹⁷ अर्थात् हमारी परिस्थितियाँ ही हमारे भीतर चेतना का बीज बोती हैं। स्थापित मूल्य, रूढ़ियाँ, और मान्यताओं तथा प्रतिरोधी चेतना दोनों एक दूसरे की विरोधी है और दोनों में संघर्ष तब तक चलता रहता है जब तक कि प्रतिरोधी चेतना स्वयं को न स्थापित कर दे। प्रस्तुत लेख में मैंने निम्नलिखित प्रसिद्ध साहित्यकारों की तत्संबंधी उक्तियों का विश्लेषण करते हुए दलित चेतना की समझ को विस्तार देने का प्रयास किया है।

मराठी दलित साहित्य के जाने-माने साहित्यकार शरण कुमार लिम्बाले ने दलित चेतना की व्याख्या इस तरह से की है-- “दलित साहित्य में दलित चेतना, संघर्ष से नाता रखने वाली क्रांतिकारी मानसिकता है। मनुष्य को केंद्र मानकर जाति व्यवस्था के विरुद्ध विद्रोह करने वाली प्रतीति है। दलित चेतना गुलाम को गुलामी से अवगत करा देती है। दलित चेतना दलित साहित्य

का महत्वपूर्ण जनज-बीज है”¹⁸ अर्थात दलित चेतना ही दलित साहित्य के जन्म का कारण है। दलित आलोचक रामचन्द्र के अनुसार “दलित चेतना का संबंध दलित दृष्टि और विचारधारा से है, वर्ण-व्यवस्था और किसी भी प्रकार के शोषण एवं अन्याय के अंत से है, हिन्दू व्यवस्था की असमानता और हिंसा के प्रति विद्रोह से है और समतापरक व्यवस्था की निर्मिति से है”¹⁹ दलित साहित्य दलितों की चेतना को अभिव्यक्ति देता है। इसमें दलित मानवता का स्वर है। पारंपरिक सोच के प्रति एक नकार है। एक विद्रोह है। यह विद्रोह उस व्यवस्था के प्रति है जिनकी वजह से आज वे दलित हैं।

ओमप्रकाश वाल्मीकि के शब्दों में “दलित चेतना का सरोकार इस प्रश्न से बहुत गहरे तक जुड़ा है कि ‘मैं कौन हूँ? मेरी क्या पहचान है? इसी सवाल से दलित लेखक की रचनाशीलता को ऊर्जा मिलती है दलित की व्यथा, दुख, पीड़ा, शोषण का विवरण देना या बखान करना ही दलित चेतना नहीं है, या दलित पीड़ा का भावुक और अश्रु-विगलित वर्णन, जो मौलिक चेतना से विहीन हो। चेतना का सीधा संबंध दृष्टि से होता है जो दलितों की सांस्कृतिक, ऐतिहासिक, सामाजिक भूमिका की छवि के तिलस्म को तोड़ती है। वह है दलित चेतना”¹⁰ अपने विचार को विस्तार देते हुए वे कहते हैं “भारतीय समाज व्यवस्था को समझे बगैर दलित चेतना की तीव्रता का अहसास कठिन है। दलित साहित्य के सरोकारों में दलित चेतना की महत्वपूर्ण भूमिका है। आत्म-विक्षेपण, अस्मिता की तलाश, जीवन-मूल्यों की खोज, मानवीय सरोकारों की पड़ताल आदि-आदि दलित संस्कृति के मूल आधार हैं। इन सवालों से ही दलित चेतना का उद्गम है और डॉ. अंबेडकर के जीवन दर्शन, सामाजिक संघर्ष से ऊर्जा पाकर साहित्यिक अभिव्यक्ति में परिवर्तित हुआ है”¹¹ दलित चेतना का सीधा संबंध अंबेडकर दर्शन से है वही प्रेरणाश्रोत भी है। सामाजिक उत्पीड़न, सामंती सोच, वर्ण-व्यवस्था से उपजी उंच-नीच ने दलितों को युगों से मानसिक गुलामी में जकड़ कर रखा हुआ है। उसकी मुक्ति के तमाम रास्ते बंद थे, इस गुलामी से मुक्त होने का विचार ही दलित चेतना है जिसे ज्योतिबा फुले और अंबेडकर ने दार्शनिक आधार दिया जिसका केंद्रबिन्दु यही शोषित जन है।

डॉ. गंगाधर पनतावणे भी इसी तथ्य पर ज़ोर देते हैं कि “दलित साहित्य की प्रेरणा न मार्क्सवाद है, न हिंदुवाद, न नीग्रो साहित्य है। दलित साहित्य की प्रेरणा केवल अंबेडकरवाद है”।¹² निस्संदेह दलित चेतना का संबंध अंबेडकरवादी विचारधारा से है।

बाबुराव बगुल की धारणा है कि “दलित चेतना साहित्य और आम आदमी के सम्बन्धों को व्यापकता देती है। दलित साहित्य इंसान को केन्द्र बनाता है। इंसान को महानता प्रदान करता है। इंसान प्रकृति का एक नन्हा सा रूप है। प्रकृति हमेशा गतिशील और सृजनशील होनी चाहिए स्वतन्त्रता, समता और बंधुत्व की मूल भावना दलित साहित्य की मूल गर्भ चेतना है। दलित साहित्य की अनुभूति परंपरागत साहित्य से बिल्कुल अलग है क्योंकि दलित चेतना मनुष्यों की मुक्ति की बात करती है”।¹³ जिन प्रतिकूल परिस्थितियों ने दलित जीवन की गतिशीलता में अवरोध उत्पन्न किए दलित चेतना ने उनका प्रतिरोध किया।

गुजरती दलित कवि जयंत परमार दलित चेतना के संदर्भ में अपने विचार व्यक्त करते हुए कहते हैं कि “अंबेडकर दर्शन ने दलित कवियों के मन में आत्मसम्मान जाग्रत किया है, उसके फलस्वरूप जीवनानुभाव को देखने और पहचानने की उनकी भूमिका विद्रोह तथा नकार से भर उठी है। उसकी आवेग किसी तूफान की तरह है। उसका सौन्दर्य और उसका सामर्थ्य उसकी वेदना में है”।¹⁴ जब बाबा अम्बेडकर जैसा व्यक्तित्व दलितों के पक्ष में खड़ा हुआ और विवेकपूर्ण ढंग से दलितों के हक की लड़ाई उन्होंने लड़ी तब दबे-कुचले, सताये दलितों को एहसास हुआ कि सामाजिक भेदभाव के खिलाफ उन्हें भी अपनी आवाज ऊंची करनी चाहिए।

वरिष्ठ आलोचक शंभुनाथ दलित चेतना से संबन्धित विचार रखते हुए कहते हैं-“दलित चेतना और दलित विमर्श को एक नहीं समझना चाहिए। दलित चेतना का एक मोड़ है दलित विमर्श। यह महत्वपूर्ण होते हुए भी दलित चेतना की आखिरी मंजिल नहीं है। आज के समाज में कोई दलित अपनी दलित अस्मिता तक सीमित नहीं है। उसकी पहचान एक किसान, व्यवसायी, कम्प्युटर इंजीनियर आदि विभिन्न रूपों में है। वह वैश्वीकरण के दौर में अपनी नयी पहचान गढ़ रहा

है। वह भारतीय समाज और विश्व की समस्याओं से बचकर एक ही खोल में हर वक्त नहीं रह सकता। कोई भी मनुष्य इकहरी अस्मिता में खुलकर सांस नहीं ले सकता। दलितों की राजनीतिक और आर्थिक सफलताओं का व्यापक असर उनकी सामाजिक प्रतिष्ठा पर पड़ा है। यदि उनके पास सत्ता हो तो ब्राह्मण भी उनके चरण छूते हैं दलितों को अहसास हुआ है कि दमनकारी सत्ता केवल तभी पिघलती है जब उसके सामने एक सत्ता खड़ी हो जाती है। दलितों को इस अति-सामुदायिक अनुभव तक पहुँचाने में वर्चस्वादी मनुवादी संस्कृति की जड़ता का बहुत बड़ा हाथ है।¹⁵ समय के साथ दलितों की परिस्थियाँ और पहचान दोनों बदलेंगी। वह केवल 'दलित' की पहचान तक सीमित नहीं रहेगा। आज जिस उद्देश्य से वह लड़ रहा है, आगामी दिनों में 'वर्तमान मुद्दे' के अतिरिक्त और कई मुद्दे उनके संघर्ष में शामिल हो जाएंगे।

आगे वे कहते हैं कि दलित आत्मकथाओं द्वारा सबसे पहले दलितों ने अपनी चेतना का परिचय दिया है। साथ ही भारत की सामाजिक विषमता को मिटाने की पहल भी की। इस आत्मकथा को हमारे सामने लाने वाले साहित्यकारों ने भूख, अवमानना, भेद-भाव और शर्म की जिंदगी जी कर अपने जीवन की सच्चाई से हमारा साक्षात्कार करवाया। अपनी आपबीती कहने के लिए उन्होंने अपनी भाषा और अपने मुहावरे खुद गढ़े। इसलिए कई बार उनकी भाषा का विरोधी स्वर, तिक्तता और गाली गलौज सुनकर सभ्य समाज नाक-भौं सिकुड़ता है।

खगेन्द्र ठाकुर कहते हैं कि "दलित होने का त्रासद बोध होना, दलित होते रहने की स्थिति को अस्वीकार करना, वर्तमान राजसत्ता में समुचित भागीदारी और कुल मिलाकर दलित्व से मुक्ति दलित चेतना के तत्व हैं।"¹⁶ दलित चेतना यथास्थिति से समझौता नहीं करता। दलित होने के बोध से निरंतर मुक्ति के लिए प्रयत्नशील रहना दलित चेतना के लक्षण हैं।

डॉ. अभय कुमार दूबे के अनुसार -"स्वतन्त्रता, समता और बंधुता की मूल चेतना दलित साहित्य की मूल गर्भ चेतना है। दलित साहित्य की अनुभूति परंपरागत साहित्य से बिल्कुल अलग

है, क्योंकि दलित चेतना मुक्ति की बात करती है"।¹⁷ दलितों का आक्रोश अर्थहीन नहीं है समाजिक असमानता और उनके प्रति भेद-भाव के खिलाफ ही एक जंग है।

हरपाल सिंह 'अरुण' के शब्दों में "दलित चेतना का सबसे बड़ा गुण यह है कि यह कुंठा, घृणा और प्रतिशोध जैसी मानवीय दुर्बलताओं को चिंतन की आंच में तपाकर जागरूकता, करुणा और सहअस्तित्व में रूपांतरित कर देती है। राजनीतिक और सामाजिक इतिहास इस बात के प्रमाण हैं कि दलितों के साथ भेदपरक व्यवहार मौजूद रहा है जिसके कारण दलितों के भीतर हीनताबोध की कुंठाजनित मानसिकता जन्म ले गयी है। इससे मुक्त होने के लिए समाज को दलित चेतना के रूप में मनोवैज्ञानिक-सामाजिक उपचारात्मक आधार मिल गया है, जिसके माध्यम से समाज में सकारात्मक चिंतन विकसित होने लगा। दलित चेतना का समाज चेतना में रूपान्तरण होने लगा। यह दलित चेतना ही है जो साहित्य को विस्तृत समय तथा बृहतर समाज के साथ जोड़ती है अर्थात् सामाजिक दायित्व निर्वहन करने की प्रेरणा देकर समाज को जोड़ने का काम करती है"।¹⁸ इसका यह अर्थ नहीं लगाना चाहिए कि दलित चेतना हताशा या कुंठा से उत्पन्न प्रतिक्रिया है इसमें दो राय नहीं कि यह वर्णवाद की विरोधी है पर मानवता की पक्षधरता इसकी पहली शर्त है।

ओमप्रकाश वाल्मीकि के शब्दों में "वर्ण व्यवस्था का विरोध, जाति-भेद और सांप्रदायिकता का विरोध दलित चेतना की प्राथमिकताओं में है। दलित चेतना अलगाववाद की जगह समता, एकता और भाईचारे का समर्थन करती है। मानव-मुक्ति संघर्ष में यह मनुष्य की स्वतन्त्रता और सामाजिक बदलाव के लिए कटिबद्ध है। आर्थिक क्षेत्र में यह पूंजीवाद का विरोध करती है। यह अधिनायकवाद, सामंतवाद, ब्राह्मणको मानव विरोधी मानती है। वहीं भाषावाद और लिंगवाद की भी विरोधी है। दलित चेतना साहित्यिक मानदंडों में महाकाव्य की रामचंद्र शुक्लीय परिभाषा से असहमत और पारंपरिक सौन्दर्यशास्त्र का विरोधी है"।¹⁹

अर्थात् जीवन के हर क्षेत्र में जो मानव विरोधी स्थापित मूल्य थे उसके खिलाफ आवाज उठाकर दलितों ने अपनी चेतना का परिचय दिया। जहां सामाजिक संरचना के सत्ताधारियों का

उन्होंने विरोध किया वहीं दलित साहित्य के रूप में नए साहित्यिक मानदंड स्थापित किए। विषय के अनुकूल कथ्य और शिल्प में भी नए प्रयोग किए गए। पारंपरिक सौंदर्यशास्त्र के स्थान पर नया सौंदर्यशास्त्र गढ़ने की आवश्यकता पर बल देकर जीर्ण-शीर्ण परम्पराओं का बहिष्कार करना दलित चेतना का ही प्रसार है।

इस तरह से दलित चेतना के केंद्र में मानव की मुक्ति निहित है और जीवन के प्रत्येक क्षेत्र में वह समानता की आकांक्षी है। मनुष्यता को कुचलने वाली हर उस चेष्टा के खिलाफ एक जंग है। दलित साहित्य दलित चेतना की उत्कट और सार्थक अभिव्यक्ति है।

संदर्भ-सूची

कालिका, सहाय, राजवल्लभ, श्रीवास्तव, मुकुंदी लाल, बृहद हिन्दी शब्द कोश(1992), वाराणसी,

सप्तम संस्करण, ज्ञानमंडल मुद्रणालय पृ.510

वर्मा, रामचंद्र, संपादक, संक्षिप्त हिन्दी शब्दसागर(1971) वाराणसी, सप्तम संस्करण, नागरी

प्रचारिणी सभा काशी, पृ.468

ठाकुर, डॉ. हरिनारायण, दलित साहित्य का समाजशास्त्र(2010) नई दिल्ली, दूसरा संस्करण,

भारतीय ज्ञानपीठ, पृ.51

ठाकुर, डॉ. हरिनारायण, दलित साहित्य का समाजशास्त्र(2010) नई दिल्ली, दूसरा संस्करण,

भारतीय ज्ञानपीठ, पृ.51

कुमार, दीपक, चौबे, देवेन्द्र, संपादक, हाशिये का वृतांत, रामचंद्र(2011) हरियाणा, प्रथम संस्करण,

आधार, पृ. 286

वाल्मीकि, ओमप्रकाश, दलित साहित्य का सौंदर्यशास्त्र(2009) नई दिल्ली, प्रथम, राधाकृष्ण
प्रकाशन, पृ.16

कुमार, दीपक, चौबे, देवेन्द्र, संपादक, हाशिये का वृत्तांत, सूरज बड़त्या(2011) हरियाणा, प्रथम,
आधार प्रकाशन, पृ.235

लिम्बाले, शरण कुमार, दलित साहित्य का सौंदर्यशास्त्र(2000), नई दिल्ली, प्रथम संस्करण, वाणी
प्रकाशन, पृ.40

कुमार, दीपक, चौबे, देवेन्द्र, संपादक, हाशिये का वृत्तांत, सूरज बड़त्या(2011) हरियाणा, प्रथम,
आधार प्रकाशन, पृ.291

वाल्मीकि, ओमप्रकाश, दलित साहित्य का सौंदर्यशास्त्र(2009) नई दिल्ली, प्रथम संस्करण,
राधाकृष्ण प्रकाशन, पृ.28-29

वही, पृ.32

वही, पृ.96

वही, पृ.30-31

वही, पृ.30-31

शंभुनाथ, भारतीय अस्मिता और हिन्दी(2012)नई दिल्ली, प्रथम संस्करण, सामयिक प्रकाशन,
पृ.329

ठाकुर डॉ. हरिनारायण, दलित साहित्य का समाजशास्त्र(2010) नई दिल्ली ,दूसरा संस्करण,
भारतीय ज्ञानपीठ ,पृ.57

वही, पृ.58

अरुण, हरपाल सिंह ,दलित साहित्य के आधार तत्व(2011)नई दिल्ली, प्रथम संस्करण, भारतीय
पुस्तक परिषद, पृ.147

वाल्मीकि, ओमप्रकाश, दलित साहित्य का सौंदर्यशास्त्र(2009) नई दिल्ली, प्रथम संस्करण,
राधाकृष्ण प्रकाशन, प्रा. लि., पृ.59



Scan to
visit our
website



Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College

8/9, Bankim Chatterjee Street,
College Square, Kolkata-700073,
West Bengal, India.

Email: ssjalancollege@gmail.com

Website:

<https://ssjalangirlscollege.org.in/>

